

SUBVERSIVE STAGES

**THEATER IN PRE- AND POST-COMMUNIST
HUNGARY, ROMANIA AND BULGARIA**

Ileana Alexandra Orlich



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Subversive Stages

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*Theater in Pre- and Post-Communist Hungary,
Romania, and Bulgaria*

Ileana Alexandra Orlich



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To Anthony

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Foreword

The Ghosts of History Redux: Intertextuality, Rewriting, Adaptation

Despite changing historical, political, and economic conditions, the preoccupation with the communist era remains a timely endeavor in most countries that experienced this regime, and a steady stream of artistic and critical interventions dealing with this topic continues to emerge. Ileana Alexandra Orlich's *Subversive Stages* fits neatly into this tendency, and constitutes an ambitious and meticulous investigation of landmark dramatic revisionings centered on one of the most horrific aspects in recent European history—the totalitarian dictatorships in the former Soviet bloc. Orlich's important monograph stands out for the following reasons: it is a single-authored and tightly contextualized study on a broad spectrum of dramatic outputs that in most other cases would be addressed in an edited collection of essays; it deals with the theatrical and playwriting tradition of three countries not routinely discussed together (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania); and it provides a pertinent commentary rooted in in-depth textual analysis and sociopolitical contextualization rather than the more ephemeral genre of performance criticism. The book brings together eight plays by a range of innovative authors from these three countries, some internationally known and widely staged, and others predominantly active in their indigenous theater sphere. The plays have in common a strong preoccupation with revealing aspects of totalitarianism as experienced in these countries, and have been written over the last three decades or so, thus some predating the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of communism and others appearing as a reflection on a bygone era. In addition to texts by contemporary authors, the volume also includes what might be termed as an Ur-play by Mikhail Bulgakov, discussed here as an *avant la lettre* transposition of a classic source and as a model of sorts for the other

authors in addressing, through irony, the monstrosity of communist censorship and demonstrating that subversive political theater originates in fact in the former Soviet Union before being adopted and deployed throughout its satellite bloc.

Historically, theater has been one of the most coherent and imaginative oppositional platforms against communist dictatorship in several Central and Eastern European countries, able to provide survival strategies of sorts and, in many cases, initiating cultural resistance against a hostile and an inhuman regime. As a result of ever increasing state-imposed surveillance and censorship, theater makers were put in a position to continually envision new ways of addressing issues of current concern, and utilizing geographically and historically distant material has become the most frequently practiced route. One strand was the regular staging of the Western canon, owing to the fact that translated works were, on the whole, less scrutinized than indigenous writing. In this way, theater practitioners with an oppositional agenda were able to take advantage of the cultural capital attached to the source material and thus, divert censorial attention from potentially relevant connections between then and now. Under the guise of a highly reputed foreign author and context, therefore, a fresh subtext could be developed that actually spoke about current problems and situations that would have been censored if overtly addressed.

It is crucial to stress that contemporary Western culture was out of bounds in most socialist countries, due to the strong ideological opposition between socialist and capitalist values. Following a similar government-sanctioned official cultural policy, most communist states championed the engagement with cultural and literary heritage solely in a universal and historical sense, because communism could see the benefit of the intellectual and spiritual connection between this tradition and their own agenda. This is why classics, in particular Shakespeare together with Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, and ancient Greek drama, could become the staples of theater repertoires in many countries, and Romania, Bulgaria, or Hungary were no exception to this practice. In this sense, the mediation of these plays through various forms—ranging from relatively straightforward inter-linguistic translation to various degrees of adaptation—has played a defining role in the construction of home-grown dramatic conventions. Paraphrasing Jan Kott's seminal thesis that "Shakespeare is our contemporary," theater makers

kept returning time and again to Shakespeare—and other canonical authors—to, in fact, comment on their present.

This process was invariably prompted by a unique braiding of artistic and political conscience, and *Hamlet* in particular has become emblematic for a broad spectrum of oppositional agendas as the protagonist's inquisitive mind came to symbolize the ultimate remedial influence facing the so-called certainties of totalitarian regimes. In Romania in the 1980s, for instance, landmark *Hamlet* productions were staged almost simultaneously by two of the country's most innovative directors: in Romanian by Alexandru Tocilescu at the Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest, and in Hungarian by Gábor Tompa at the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj, thus creating a shared platform for addressing life under one of the most hostile communist dictatorships and also revealing the dire situation of minority rights in this context. In short, making use of canonical works has become the safest route for securing production rights under communism, while this act also constituted a potent form of cultural resistance. As W.B. Worthen observes, performance "is a way of interpreting ourselves to ourselves; performance of the classics necessarily threatens to become an act of transgression, in which the cultural tradition embodied by the work is forced to tell a new story."¹ Drawing on old stories to talk about new ones was essentially the way theater functioned in pre-1989 Central and Eastern Europe, but since political subversion was channeled through allusions and metaphors, the authorities often overlooked taboo references or, in some cases, were hesitant to expose them in order to avert even more damaging scandals.

Appropriations of this nature—through acculturation and indeed naturalization—are well documented in several cultural contexts and, in this era of global Shakespeare Studies, landmark publications such as *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* by Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova² will no doubt continue to spur further advocates. Sokolova declares *Hamlet* "an instrument of self-analysis across Europe, representing national concerns—be they German, Russian, Polish or others—at moments of crisis," and it is crucial in this context to state that

¹ W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 191.

² Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001).

from the point of view of this approach, appropriating Shakespeare for local political and cultural purposes is an entirely legitimate endeavor: through Shakespeare, “among other things, the Bulgarians aspired to constitute their ‘Europeanness.’”³

As a matter of fact, the study of this process of cultural appropriation has to date been conducted primarily on a country-by-country basis, and valuable work has been published on Shakespearean reappropriation in the context of the three countries discussed here. Nicoleta Cinpoș has published extensively on political *Hamlet* productions in communist and post-communist Romania—including the study *Shakespeare’s Hamlet in Romania, 1778–2008: A Study in Translation, Performance, and Cultural Adaptation*,⁴ and so did Monica Matei-Chesnoiu whose landmark edited collection *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory*⁵ brought together leading Romanian Shakespeare scholars. Hungarian scholarship in this sense includes the wide-ranging work of Márta Minier, from which for purposes of brevity I only single out the article “Claiming Shakespeare as ‘Our Own,’”⁶ and the contribution of Veronika Schandl, in particular the study *Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain—Shakespeare’s Plays on the Stages of Kádár Regime Hungary*.⁷ Both latter scholars, as well as Cinpoș, have published in dedicated thematic anthologies such as *The Hamlet Zone*:

³ Shurbanov and Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red*, 101–2. Manfred Pfister, “Polish and German *Hamlets* in Dialogue,” in *Hamlet East-West*, ed. M. Gibinska and J. Limon (Gdansk: Theatrum Gedanense Foundation, 1998), 18. I am grateful to Márta Minier for conversation on this topic and for her illuminating article “Claiming Shakespeare as ‘Our Own,’” in *Shakespeare in Europe: History and Memory*, ed. Marta Gibinska and Agnieszka Romanowska-Kowalska (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2008), 177–85. Also many thanks to Mihály Szilágyi-Gál and Péter Erdősi for their advice on shaping this text.

⁴ Nicoleta Cinpoș, *Shakespeare’s Hamlet in Romania, 1778–2008: A Study in Translation, Performance, and Cultural Adaptation* (Levinstone, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

⁵ Monica Matei-Chesnoiu, *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2006).

⁶ Márta Minier, “Claiming Shakespeare as ‘Our Own,’” in *Shakespeare in Europe: History and Memory*, ed. Marta Gibinska and Agnieszka Romanowska-Kowalska (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2008), 177–85.

⁷ Veronika Schandl, *Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain—Shakespeare’s Plays on the Stages of Kádár Regime Hungary* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

*Reworking Hamlet for European Cultures*⁸, edited by a British scholar and fueled by the international expertise of its various contributors.

Another route favored by practitioners with an oppositional agenda has been the unique combination between indigenous playwriting and dramatic appropriation, whereby classics would not only be recontextualized through *mise-en-scène* and therefore offer a fresh political subtext at the level of the performance text, but reimagined textually into autonomous works of art. Orlich names this practice “dramatic transcreation,” and demonstrates that playwrights in communist Central and Eastern Europe found an effective and artistically valid platform for political protest that allowed tapping into the cultural capital carried by the canonical source text while also facilitating the inclusion of the contemporary playwright’s voice. These works that essentially rewrite and relocate key works of the canon occupy a space in between world and indigenous literatures. The eight plays discussed in this book are linked together by a number of thematic threads that also unite the works from across the three countries and their dramatic traditions, in a dialogue of sorts with one another. The most striking element is the plays’ complex intertextuality with the Western canon, via resonances with French, Russian, and English classical literature and theater. Plays by the Russian Mikhail Bulgakov, the Hungarian György Spiró, and the Romanian Nic Ularu are juxtaposed in Part 1 due to their imaginative takes on Jules Verne, Molière, and Chekhov, respectively. Part 2 is dedicated to rewritings of Shakespeare by the Romanian Matéi Vişniec, Hungary’s Géza Bereményi, and Bulgaria’s Nedyalko Yordanov. Part 3 also deploys an intertextual ambition of sorts, however, in this case it is not dramatic or literary texts that are cannibalized but iconic historical figures (Peter the Great, Joan of Arc). This cluster establishes parallels between political and religious exaltation, and examines the consequences of autocracy through an analysis of relatively recent plays by the Romanian Vlad Zografi and the Bulgarian Stefan Tsanev.

Through this structure and the inclusion of pre–World War II Bulgakov in a line-up of contemporary playwrights, Orlich demonstrates that the subversive rewriting of seemingly inoffensive classical authors, such as Jules Verne, is a phenomenon that occurred already in the Soviet Union.

⁸ Ruth J. Owen, ed., *The Hamlet Zone* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012).

Bulgakov's stage adaptation discussed in Part 1 offers the opportunity to address the excesses of Stalinist censorship and the political, artistic and moral inconsistency that characterized the theater system of the era. In addition to being a playwright, Bulgakov was also an artistic director, appointed to his post in 1930 by Stalin, despite the fact that Bulgakov's plays have been banned from stage production the previous year. The last play Bulgakov had witnessed in production was none other than *The Crimson Island*, and this play is present in this collection precisely because it led, owing to damaging reviews, to the subsequent silencing of the playwright and his effective elimination from performance history for the remainder of the Soviet era.

Censorship has also affected some of the contemporary playwrights discussed in the volume. Matéi Vişniec's plays were banned from professional production in Romania until 1990, and censorship appears as a recurrent trope across the various plays, for example in *The Impostor* where Spiró creates the memorable character of Chodzko, on the surface a drama critic but in actuality the instrument of political surveillance and suppression. The more ironic the rewriting, the more subversive the political critique; and I argue that these case studies constitute bold examples of successful stage adaptation, where intercultural, intergeneric, and intertemporal transfers and striking transmutations of plot, timing, and character have taken place. The dramatic transcreations discussed in this volume fulfill a range of criteria generally set out for work to be classed as adaptations: they operate with an "appropriation of meaning from a prior text"⁹ and also assume awareness of these adaptations "*as adaptation*," which involves, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing."¹⁰ Continuing this analogy, the adaptive strategy utilized by the playwrights united in this volume is one of "commentary—where the original is ... altered due to the intentions" of the adaptor, and the adaptation "comments on the politics of the source text ... by means of alteration or addition."¹¹

⁹ Andrew Dudley, "Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 29.

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 139.

¹¹ Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, eds., *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (London: Routledge, 1999), 24.

The purpose of this book is to deal in detail with such forms of “alteration” and “addition,” whereby classical texts are overtly rerouted toward another situation, relevant for the contemporary playwright. This situation is totalitarianism and communism in Eastern and Central Europe, and Orlich groups together convincing case studies from three countries with a thriving dramatic tradition that has been seriously underexposed abroad (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania). Polish, Czech, and Russian theater have managed to obtain a worldwide reputation, due to major playwrights (Mrożek, Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz, Havel, Chekhov, Gogol, Gorky) as well as groundbreaking theater practitioners (Grotowski, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold). However, other countries in the region have remained much more inward-looking in terms of their dramatic outputs. This gap has not been helped by the lack of adequately executed translations into languages of international circulation, but also by the relatively marginal status of the countries and the inaccessibility of the language in which this work has been created. Owing to the fact that Romania has a sizeable Hungarian minority population (and Hungary, to a lesser extent, a Romanian one), there is certain degree of cultural amalgamation taking place between these two countries which not only acts as a solid argument for a joint discussion but effectively makes an entirely separate analysis impossible. In other words, grouping these three countries together in one study is a necessary step toward shedding flash light on cultural and historical specificity, and comments on the need for instituting alternative and/or parallel categories for the study of a region in constant flux and transformation.

The ongoing preoccupation of historians with the territory between Russia to the east, and Germany and Austria to the west is notable at a glance, and major studies appear with regularity both in the countries concerned and in the West. For instance, Routledge has announced for May 2016 the publication of *The Routledge History of East Central Europe since 1700*, edited by Irina Livezeanu and Árpád von Klimó, which is being promoted as a volume “working with new methodological and transnational perspectives, creating a landmark text that presents the very latest in historiography on modern East Central Europe.” If this collection succeeds, as it aims, in opening the study of a region that has experienced relentless political, economic, and social turmoil, from its domination by mostly political and national historical interpretations, then it will indeed reshape

perspectives and prompt subsequent comparative and transnational studies of East Central Europe. Alongside historical studies per se, the region also generates more personal responses from historians, such as Yale academic Marci Shore's 2013 memoir of her encounters with the territory.¹²

To date, most publications have aimed for situating individual countries in more or less opposing clusters within the region, pointing out not so much their shared history during communism but rightly focusing on crucial differences that have shaped their destinies prior to the advent of this regime. Geographical location, religion, and imperial spheres of influence have generally set up the boundaries in this sense, and as a result, the taxonomical continuum on the region ranges from Central Europe, East Central Europe to Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The boundaries within these classifications fluctuate, although Romania and Bulgaria tend to be allocated to either Eastern Europe or the Balkans, while Hungary to Central Europe, East Central Europe, and occasionally to Eastern Europe. Conventionally, Romania and Bulgaria have been examined together in historical and political studies, and they have of course been granted similar status in terms of their recent EU and NATO accession. Currently they are battling their integration into the Schengen space, and are facing similar Western European reticence with regard to a new wave of mainly economic migration. Bulgaria and Romania have been treated side-by-side as part of the Balkans by numerous historians, including the influential Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, whose 2006 volume *The Balkans: A Post-Communist History* addresses them in the company of Albania, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The same authors include Hungary in the companion volume, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (first published by Routledge in 1998 and revised in 2007), where they also examine the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Polish historian Piotr Wandycz in *The Price of Freedom* (1991) surveys the intricate history of what he terms East Central Europe, which in his view includes the present day countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

¹² Marci Shore, *The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Crown Books/Random House, 2013).

In *Subversive Stages*, Orlich uses the term Eastern and Central Europe to reference geographical location, but rather than reverting to a formal opposition, she takes an innovative approach that calls attention to the fact that, despite a broad variety of perspectives, the joint treatment of Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary is yet to be initiated in sources of a historical or political nature. Scholars tend to concentrate on either individual countries or preestablished clusters, although both Western and local historians dedicate a steady flow of major studies to developments in the region. Thus, British historian Thomas Gallagher has consolidated himself as the key Western expert on Romania, having published extensively on both the communist and postcommunist period. Christian Iordachi also addresses both these phases, with the added benefit of being Romanian-born while operating in an international arena of scholarship and research. The Bulgarian Diana Mishkova occupies a similar role, in that she illuminates the communist and postcommunist period in Bulgaria from the dual perspective of a native and that of an international scholar. In Hungary, Gábor Tabajdi and Krisztián Ungváry have written extensively on the traumatic impact of totalitarianism on Hungarian society, and in 2008 published a landmark study on the operation of the secret police, *Elhallgatott múlt—A pártállam és a belügy: A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990* (The silenced past: Political police in Hungary, 1956–1990). Authors such as László Sziklai and János Pelle have drawn parallels between two extreme ideologies—Stalinism and fascism, totalitarianism and antisemitism, while Austrian journalist (of Hungarian Jewish origin) Paul Lendvai has published widely accessible yet controversial studies on most aspects of Hungarian history, including 1956 and the transition from a communist to a democratic regime.

Orlich refrains from the risks of politically charged categorization inherent in many indigenous historical sources, and draws on the relatively neutral and geographically distant Anne Applebaum's book, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1945–1956*.¹³ Thus, Orlich acknowledges differences in terms of religion and colonial past between the countries under discussion; however, she opts to concentrate on the fact that in terms

¹³ Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

of these countries' dramatic response to communism and totalitarianism there is a viable common ground. All three countries united here under scrutiny have experienced severe censorship in the theater during the communist regime, and encountered difficulties in making their dramatic voice widely known beyond national borders. Compared to Poland and the Czech Republic, indigenous writing for the theater of a discernible aesthetic merit has been relatively modest in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary during the communist period, theaters excelling instead in the staging of much safer canonical authors and practitioners gravitating towards the more rewarding directorial *auteur* status.

The playwrights discussed in this study are closely attuned to historical and social events, and form a lineage of politically engaged writers. With the exception of Bulgakov, they are all contemporary authors who have not yet completed a full body of work (most started their careers in the eighties and nineties), but who have gained a reputation in their home countries and, in many cases, abroad. The majority reside in their native countries, with only Nic Ularu and Matéi Vişniec living outside the region, in the United States and France, respectively. Both are actively involved in diasporic movements and, in addition to English and French, continue writing in their mother tongues. The Hungarian György Spiró and the Romanian-born French resident Matéi Vişniec are perhaps the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful playwrights included here, both with a strong public persona and with an ability to represent their own work through conversations with an international audience. As one of the most frequently staged authors among the ones included in this volume, Matéi Vişniec, states that artistic reflection on historical and political events does not need to be immediate: "Literature cannot instantly reflect the horrors of the world. There is a need for a gestation period, as writers need a certain degree of distance from actual events to examine current events and political crises."¹⁴ With regard to communism, Vişniec's concerns do not have to do so much with timing as with people forgetting facts without having fully understood

¹⁴ Vişniec quoted in Dan Boicea, "Matéi Vişniec, dramaturg: Fără ajutorul unui regizor bun, n-am făcut nimic" [Without a good director I haven't done anything], *Adevărul*, July 12, 2010. http://adevarul.ro/cultura/istorie/matei-visniec-dramaturg-fara-ajutorul-unui-regizor-bun-n-am-facut-nimic-1_50b9f7cc7c42d5a663ad57f6/index.html.

the scale of the atrocities committed in the name of this ideology. To this end, theater has the mission to play an active role in keeping collective memory alive regarding communism, which Vişniec calls an act of “horror disguised as humanism.”¹⁵ As a public intellectual, Vişniec has repeatedly spoken out about the dangers of not acknowledging the injustices committed in the name of communism and he reiterates that to remember is an act of duty, even if inclined to forgive.

This volume is testimony to the fact that writers and artists in the region are far from letting the topic of communism and totalitarianism go out of sight. Most playwrights reunited in this study have been born in the immediate post–World War II period, and consequently experienced communism to the full in their adult lives. Whether they reverted to acts of actual political dissidence in their own lives is not the subject of this inquiry, however, several utilize the trope of the artist and/or intellectual as a way of addressing cultural resistance under totalitarianism. Spiró, for instance, intertwines several cultural, historical, and political strands in *The Impostor* by centering his play on the nineteenth-century Polish actor Bogusławski, who is about to perform in Molière’s *Tartuffe* and, through that, aiming to question not only Tartuffe’s deceitfulness but also Russia’s appropriation of Poland while, in actual fact, his main purpose is to address the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Nedyalko Yordanov constructs *The Murder of Gonzago* around “The Mousetrap” scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and therefore utilizes perhaps the most famous metatheatrical device in literary history to showcase the potential of performance and of the politically committed artist to shed light on the political landscape of communist Bulgaria. Vişniec focuses on two towering figures in theater history, Shakespeare and Meyerhold, to elaborate on the responsibility of the artist in adverse historical conditions. Meyerhold, the avant-garde Russian director persecuted by the Stalinist regime, is portrayed not only as the archetypal artist but also the emblematic artistic director who achieves *auteur* status with visionary stagings of classics—a practice favored by theater professionals throughout Eastern Europe. Meyerhold’s uncompromising version of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* overtly critiques the present and, as a result, is subject to revision

¹⁵ Matéi Vişniec, “Să nu uităm, chiar dacă iertăm” [We mustn’t forget even if we do forgive], in *Procesul comunismului prin teatru* [The trial of communism through theatre] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012).

(in other words, Meyerhold is asked to compromise his integrity and show subservience to the regime); however, Vişniec is unwavering in his belief that the creative impetus cannot be stifled by any regime.

Several authors discussed in this volume are preoccupied with examining real life figures as actors in the theater of history and with scrutinizing the ways in which history is framed, contested, and periodically rewritten. Spiró's protagonist is the legendary nineteenth-century Polish actor Bogusławski, Vlad Zografi centers on the Russian Tsar Peter the Great, while Stefan Tsanev focuses on the figure of Joan of Arc. Vişniec also discusses Joan of Arc's controversial history in his 2008 theater poem "Jeanne et le feu" [Joan and the fire] and makes Soviet dictator Stalin appear at the stage-like window watched by the inmates in *The History of Communism for Mental Patients*, while in *Richard III* has him rival the professional actors with his performance of serving them dinner, in addition to his main role as the orchestrator of the nightmare that was the communist gulag. The latter, arguably, displays the qualities of total theater on an immense scale, involving millions of extras transported on location in a site-specific and durational extravaganza that not only achieved catastrophic proportions but also redefined any previous understanding of control, manipulation, and terror.

This book is a timely intervention on an obsession that is far from letting go. Despite various attempts in several countries at dealing with the legacy of the communist regime, the impact of this ideology is far from having been absorbed, let alone adequately interpreted. Politicians have, arguably, failed the most at addressing this matter and—especially with the rise across the region in nationalist governments over the last decade—the pre-occupation has been with maintaining a contemporary version of the nation state rather than establishing a constructive dialogue about the past across ethnic and national boundaries. In these conditions, the role and responsibility of artists, dramatists, and theater makers to join and indeed take over the debate is paramount. Their artistic independence, imagination, and commitment to unveil facts remain a steady beacon of hope for a sense of clarity in a hitherto muddled process.

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Introduction

The Cultural Olympiad events inaugurated on April 23, Shakespeare's birthday, and celebrated in London around the 2012 Olympic Games highlighted theater and theatrical performances as one of today's most enduring and enriching cultural legacies. Featured prominently in the festivities, the Globe Theatre played a fitting host to all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays—each performed in a different language and staged by a different international company. According to the Festival organizers, it is imperative for us today to look at how our current world sees its own societies through the prism of Shakespeare—a playwright who was using the world as he knew it to talk about Elizabethan Britain 400 years ago.¹

Conveying the same sense that theater offers a unique mode of cultural engagement with politics within a given society, I show in this book how dramatists examine their societies through the prism of theatrical performance, by using the lenses of enduring dramatists like Shakespeare, Molière, or Chekhov to reach their audiences. Examining major twentieth- and twenty-first-century dramatic texts, I analyze the mechanisms of theater construction in modern and contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, using carefully selected plays as case studies *observable* and *definable* in their contemporary productions. I argue that by transforming, editing, or

¹ An informative overview of this unique festival is provided by the edited collection of essays of Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott, and Erin Sullivan, eds., *A Year of Shakespeare: Reliving the World Shakespeare Festival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). The cultural forces at play in the construction, use and reception of Shakespeare during the 2012 Olympic moments are explored in Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds., *Shakespeare on the Global Stage Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

reshuffling classical models in order to foreground their own political and cultural circumstances, these plays from Central and Eastern Europe and their respective theatrical performances have been instrumental in identifying the conspiratorial, conniving, and scheming politics of the totalitarian communist era.

I also examine the extent to which the reliance on classical models underscores an obsession with denouncing communism by seeking the representation of totalitarian politics on contemporary stages. Moreover, arguing that in Central and Eastern Europe weird and wonderful stage adaptations play to near perfection the dramatists' rich imagination and the use of heavy irony and dense political metaphors, I aim to imply that becoming European means no longer being communist.

In the cultures of the communist era, dramatists expressed in their plays the politically forbidden. To paraphrase Solzhenitsyn's famous dictum about writers in the Soviet Union, plays—in the former Soviet bloc countries—are powerfully subversive and insurrectional, and dramatists function as a second (or shadow) government. Often clashing with censorship due to its political engagement, the theater of Central and Eastern Europe is of primary interest as an ideological space whose critical decoding reflects the region's turbulent history—from the rise of the Bolsheviks in the early days of the Soviet Union to the Iron Curtain communism and, more recently, to the Schengen-Curtain postcommunism, which is of primary economic and political interest in countries like Romania and Bulgaria.

Through what H. R. Coursen in *Reading Shakespeare* calls a “destabilization of [classical] texts,”² the plays I examine both claim and deflect proximity to the original model in dramatic metamorphoses that bring to the stage the violent rise of the Bolsheviks in the early days of the Soviet Union (Nic Ularu's *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel*), the enforced censorship of the theater in the Soviet Union and its satellite states (Mikhail Bulgakov's *A Cabal of Hypocrites* and *Crimson Island* and György Spiró's *The Impostor*), the criminal tactics of communist regimes behind the Iron-Curtain (Matéi Vişniec's *Richard III Will Not Take Place*, Géza Bereményi's *Halmi*, and Nedyalko Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago*), and the aberrant insertion

² H.R. Coursen, *Reading Shakespeare on Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 46.

of Marxist-Leninist ideology as substitute for religion (Vlad Zografi's *Peter* and Stefan Tsanev's *The Other Death of Joan of Arc*).

In the new geography of postcommunist Europe—mapped to “center” primarily the positions of Joseph Brodsky, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel and the participation in cultural tendencies (Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment) on the subject of Eastern/Central/Western Europe—the mature Central European countries have traditionally included Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and Hungary to define themselves in opposition to the still-Eastern Russia. Included in this cultural opposition and political distancing between Central and Eastern Europe are the somewhat marginal countries like Romania and Bulgaria, which are usually left out from the main conceptual framework.

Seen as (de)centered by way of their geographically peripheral positioning in Eastern Europe, Romania and Bulgaria battle their habitual omission from the map of Central Europe and their assumed identification as a Soviet realm where communism and the Stalinist era were only a more recent imprint over a region known for its long history of oppression and a cultural backwardness associated with this space since Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453. Added to this shared political past, the more specific nuances attached to these two countries point to their traditional lack of political autonomy and national specificity invoked in the changing yet identical masters and regimes. Essentialized by historians and cultural observers in seminal studies like Larry Wolf's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, these geo-political similarities are summed up as the tradition of despotic rule over the wild, impulsive, ignorant masses, in the infusion of state politics with Orthodox Christianity, and in the continuity of Byzantine political structures as a result of a close proximity to Byzantium and later invasion by the Ottoman Empire.

In this context that identifies both countries with a late awakening to cultural reintegration in Europe, the general acceptance of such shared characteristics provides a dramatic continuum in the works of Romanian and Bulgarian playwrights, whose plays mirror politics in the world of the stage through the manipulation of language and characters and through subversive theatrical strategies that conform to a common pattern of political dramatization. In the selected plays I identify a number of common traits determined by a characteristic osmotic openness towards the political

system and cultural milieu of the Central European theater, rearticulated as a proof of these countries' process of democratization and integration since their accession to the European Union in 2007. Further substantiating the political and cultural concept of a "Broader Eastern Europe"³ commonality in the context of their recent integration, Romania and Bulgaria are currently facing a highly controversial probability of admission into the Schengen space and confirming that the general disinterest in this "East of the West" space echoes a sense of cultural isolation reflected, for example, in the limited exposure in the West of these countries' theatrical canon.⁴

A comparable type of cultural inwardness brings Hungary to the table as another "East of the West" country, with a medieval history of Byzantine-Ottoman domination sharing similar traits to that of Romania and Bulgaria.⁵ In the Stalinist era, although the enforced communism may have been slightly less oppressive than in some other countries behind the Iron Curtain, Hungary's linguistic isolation contributed to claiming a sense of separate cultural identity from geographical neighbors.⁶ This perceived difference, however, did not prevent Hungary from replicating the recurrent Stalinist practices across the region that turned the country into a hellish

³ Csaba Dupcsik, "The West, the East and the Border-Lining," *Social Sciences in Eastern Europe Newsletter*, Special Issue (2001): 37.

⁴ For an outstanding and inspiring discussion of this space, see Natasa Kovacevic, *Narrating Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵ Hungary was under Ottoman rule for a shorter period time than its neighboring countries, and in the course of its later history it gravitated towards the domination of the Habsburg Empire. In this context, however, it is important to mention this similarity, in addition to the historical testimony of the strong political and family ties between the revered Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus (the Raven) and Romanian ruler Vlad the Impaler. King Matthias was the son of the leading military and political figure John Hunyadi, equally claimed by Hungarian and Romanian history due to his dual ethnic lineage. Hunyadi fought against the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century, and Prince Vlad III Țepeș, also known as Vlad the Impaler or Dracula, ruled over Wallachia, the old name of Romania's southern province. In fact, as Philip Longworth states, "the Dracula legend was largely the creation of humanist officials at King Matthias's court," as negative propaganda tarnishing the reputation of Vlad the Impaler was meant to justify keeping Vlad a prisoner for thirteen years in Buda.

⁶ Adrian Webb, *The Routledge Companion to Central and Eastern Europe since 1919* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

place. Like Romania and Bulgaria, Hungary experienced a pronounced political disregard for ethnic minority and human rights, a tendency that has not disappeared with the change of regime after 1989. As I write in 2015, Hungary's tolerance toward Russia's aggressive tendencies, as well as the country's rising nationalism and the barriers erected to keep potential migrants out, suggest that the Hungarian ways may still be politically and culturally attached to the flawed space of Europe's East of the West that preceded the fall of communism.

Central to these three countries' theatrical productions is a collective effort to give a dramatic sense to the experiences of political evil that held the entire Central and Eastern Europe hostage to Stalinism—seen as a despotic political system—and to provide a different type of theatrical engagement from the theaters of the West where the public generally stops at observation and the text and performance adhere to a different semiotic system. To maximize the impact of theatrical performance, in this Other Europe attendance amounts to complicity as spectators want to take part and feel committed to an active communication with the play that spills the pantheon text into the present tense. This type of dramatic looping not only recalls the homogenous theatrical space of Shakespeare's time that joined actors and audience into one body but also suggests that "*Mise-en-scène* is not the reduction or the transformation of text into performance, but rather their confrontation."⁷ Enlarging the essential conception of theater and its audience, performances in Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian theaters weave a fabric of accusations gathered in a mode of production that measures the aesthetic through its political engagement. By articulating an intentionality that translates as political efficiency, Central and Eastern European theater becomes a mode of production that effectively creates the potential space for political engagement tasked not in the least with restoring dignity to the people from the former communist bloc, disdained and humiliated by political systems legitimized more ferociously here than in the other countries of the region.

Looking back to the communist era, the theater of a (de)centered Eastern Europe seems to be "retrofitting" the past by refracting the ideological pressures of Stalinism in the adaptation of the political crimes and horrifying

⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 26.

tactics of totalitarianism to the classical theater in order to reveal the region's traumatic history. An implicit other goal of the contemporary Eastern European theater is to come to terms with the troubling past by reinscribing its reformatted version in the context of today's conscious effort to restore cultural connections with the West and, more important, with their Central European neighbors, to be seen as an intricate part of a "center(ed)" Europe incorporated in the enlarged space of Central and Eastern Europe.

Thus, an analysis of the theatrical productions of Central Europe in the context of this unifying examination of the Central and Eastern European theater reveals that a democratic maturity in the postcommunist European integration cannot ignore a shared political past of the Central European countries with their (de)centered European neighbors of the once monolithic Soviet bloc. Despite persistent delimitations of Central and Eastern Europe in terms of the distinction Central (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary) and Eastern (Bulgaria, Romania) Europe, resulting in a generally assumed positive (Central)-negative (Eastern) polarity, the retroactive consideration of theatrical performances before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall becomes a plea for a more inclusive cultural understanding of today's (de)centered Eastern Europe—a process jumpstarted by such publications as the landmark anthology edited by the influential scholar of European drama, Daniel Gerould, *Playwrights before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution* (2009)⁸.

In the very Central European Czechoslovakia, for instance, the early decades of the Stalinist era point to the impossibility of reifying the Central/Eastern Europe division when taking into account the region's theatrical canon. Thus my reading of a (de)centered Eastern European theater in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria acknowledges the fluid characteristics of their productions in comparison with those of Central Europe, to suggest the limitations of a radically detached geo-political conceptualization of contemporary Europe and the impossibility to define where exactly Eastern Europe begins or ends. (As a last minute observation, one feels compelled to add that the recent events in Ukraine have prompted an updated geographical assessment of the region with Ukraine, Belarus, and the Republic

⁸ Daniel Gerould, ed. *Playwrights before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution* (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2009).

of Moldova labeled as Eastern Europe—an identification that places Romania and Bulgaria in Central Europe, no matter how arbitrarily.)

After their forced incorporation into the Soviet bloc with the Yalta Agreement at the end of World War II, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, under directives from Moscow, were assigned an official theater repertoire that included, according to Vladimir Just, “native Socialist plays, drama of the Soviet Union and of the other Socialist countries, classical drama, and plays by the progressive authors of capitalist states.”⁹ In general, this type of sheer value-based theater relied on presentational, as opposed to representational, productions to promote Soviets heroes, narrate the fight against the degenerate influences of capitalism, and praise the sacrifices required to attain communist objectives and goals through propagandistic discourse.

It is somewhat surprising that the effort to produce a “socialist” culture in the countries of the Soviet bloc could also take a considerable highbrow turn reminiscent of the 1930s Soviet Union, the paradigmatically “Stalinist” time when the Soviet government, in an effort to appropriate the great tradition of Western Europe, promoted such icons of world literature as Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, and Rabelais. Since for Stalin culture was emblematic of power, Soviet citizens were expected to accord primacy to great epics which, as Nikolai Bukharin pointed out in his speech to the First Congress of the Writers Union in 1934, “form people according to their precepts and canons.”¹⁰

Within a permanent concentration in the media and general discussions of agitprop (agitation and propaganda) skits, that outlined specific goals of the regime and not only efforts undertaken to meet these objectives but also shortcomings and detailed measures taken to overcome them, the repertoires of the Soviet theaters depended in the development of their cultural front on the new communist clique’s committed reliance on the Shakespearean theater. Once again, the model was that of the earlier Soviet culture of the 1930s, when Shakespeare appears to have been more acclaimed in Soviet Russia than in England, thanks to Stalin’s aspirations to demonstrate the

⁹ Hana Worthen, “Within and Beyond: Pavel Kohout’s Play *Makbeth* and Its Audiences,” *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 15 (2007): 115.

¹⁰ Quoted in Katerina Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 24.

superior capability of the Marxist-Leninist system to generate a superior civilization to that of continental Europe by showing more attention to culture than other countries.¹¹ It is relevant to point out in this context that Moscow took its own directives from the great champions of the proletariat and the working classes, Marx and Engels, who had repeatedly praised the Bard for his evocative realism which they considered superior to the idealism of the German Romantics. Taken from his correspondence with Marx, Engels's fragmentary statements that valued plays like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in whose "Act I alone there is more life and reality than in the whole of German literature,"¹² set the tone for the aesthetic Marxist pronouncements on the theater world across the Soviet bloc.

Adapting to the specificity of the new communist culture, all the theaters were "Shakespearized," by undergoing a manner of rewriting the Bard's plays to fit the style of the proletarian art and Soviet censorship. Even Shakespeare's life was reconstructed to fit the profile of a communist state: his family, carefully portrayed as low middle class and thus socially acceptable as a type of proletariat avant la lettre, made possible Shakespeare's inclusion in the pantheon of the great precursors of communism. Finally, the "proletarian writer"¹³ Maxim Gorky's famous 1934 proclamation of the Triad *Hamlet*, *Faust*, and *Don Quixote* as central to "progressive" literature legitimized Shakespeare, and particularly *Hamlet*, in all the countries of the Soviet bloc.

In Bulgaria, as Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Solokova show in their well-documented *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation*, Shakespeare's work was called upon to play an important part in the country's strongly politicized discourse, spearheaded by the ideological leadership and control of the Soviet Union. Joining in the sustained effort to merge art and the Soviet politics advancing the currency of Shakespeare's theater for the region, Jaroslav Pokorný's *Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia*

¹¹ Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹² Bernard Muntyan, ed., *Marx and Engels about Art* (Sofia: Partizdat, 1978), 31.

¹³ *Magnitogorskii rabochii*, March 3, 1936 and September 1, 1936. For a comprehensive discussion of the requirements imposed on reading that had to be on specific themes, see John Barber, "Working-Class Culture and Political Culture in the 1930s," in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. Hans Gunther (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).

advocated using Shakespeare's plays as artistic forms of expression in the struggle against the bourgeois art while establishing social and cultural practices within the communist Czechoslovak state. Immediately after its publication in 1955, this book became a popular text of reference that highlighted the Bard's ideological complexity compressed in what Hana Worthen aptly calls "Marxist Shakespeare with Leninist leanings."¹⁴ According to Pokorný:

It is the task of Czechoslovak cultural worker today to assist the development of human personality on new lines, and to overcome the distorted mental attitudes surviving from an earlier time. In this cause a welcome ally is Shakespeare who passes judgment on all who would like to live at the expense of society, either by setting themselves against it or above it; whether they are false to themselves in pursuing their aims or whether they play the part of parasites; whether they are heroes of tragic magnitude, or figures of ridicule.¹⁵

Yet, as Milton Crane, the reviewer for *Shakespeare's Quarterly* noticed, Pokorný's Shakespeare was an ambiguous critic, a forward thinker decrying declining feudalism and simultaneously championing the rising middle class and intellectuals, and thus allowing for conflicting interpretations and antithetical possibilities.¹⁶ Seen as leading the social classes into communism, Shakespeare could also appear as a defiant playwright, whose *Macbeth* "became the most translated of Shakespeare's dramas in the literature of a nation [Czechoslovakia] which for 300 years had been oppressed by foreign domination."¹⁷ Taking note of productions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* that were ultimately an expression of resistance of Czech patriots against the Nazi occupation of their country, Crane emphasized the dialectically inseparable compliant and noncompliant Shakespeare.

¹⁴ Hana Worthen, "Within and Beyond: Pavel Kohout's Play *Macbeth* and Its Audiences." *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 15 (2007): 111–32.

¹⁵ Jaroslav Pokorný, *Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia* (Prague: Orbis, 1955), 65.

¹⁶ Milton Crane, "Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia" Review of *Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia*, by Jaroslav Pokorný, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 81 (1957): 119.

¹⁷ Pokorný, *Shakespeare*, 63.

Pokorný's study that was inextricably linked to the rupture of traditional ideology spearheaded by the communist state was nowhere more dramatically illustrated than in the Apartment Theater project whose productions embraced the transforming potential of the theater to fill the cultural void resulting from an enforced political agenda. During the *normalization*—the period that followed the Prague Spring of 1968 and lasted through the 1980s when ideological reinforcement and censorship were heavily imposed on the arts in Czechoslovakia—Shakespeare's adaptable historical and social imagination was epitomized in the politically inflected *Play Makbeth*, Pavel Kohout's Apartment Theater production first performed in the actress Vlasta Chramostová's Prague Apartment Theater in 1978. Secretly filmed and broadcast outside communist Czechoslovakia, it inspired Stoppard's well-publicized *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth*. Meaningful to an international audience, the twin production relocated characters and situations to correspond to the landscape of oppressive ideology and conveyed, through Shakespeare's play, a denunciation of Czechoslovakia as a police state and of communism as a failed ideology. Significantly for this context, Stoppard's views on moral order in politics were expressed in his 1974 interview with *Theatre Quarterly* as follows: "all political acts have a moral basis to them and are meaningless without it."¹⁸ This position offers a touchstone applicable in his political plays, as well as in the subsequent theatrical productions of Central and Eastern Europe, for an implicit condemnation of communism in failing to en flesh the moral values of a normative morality of politics.

Traditional theater defines fictional worlds and the characters that inhabit them. But theatrical productions and their ideas, like the internationally acclaimed Apartment Theater activity and Stoppard's political adaptations, travel too, occupying different physical and metaphorical spaces in other cultures and redefining the concept of cultural translation. In locked step with Central Europe's politically subversive theater that emerged against the backdrop of Shakespeare's authority, Eastern Europe's staging of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for instance, as a not-so-veiled protest against Stalin, falls in the same genre of an enlarged conception of performances

¹⁸ Tom Stoppard, "Ambushes for the Audience: Toward a High Comedy of Ideas," *Theatre Quarterly* 4 (May–July 1974): 13.

as an instrument of subversion framed through the iconic force of a classical model. Such stagings from the classical repertoire modified to suit a changing world are certainly not circumscribed to Central and Eastern Europe. As it is well-known, in France, Camus's *Caligula*, was created from the beginning as a covert commentary against totalitarian rule. With a keen eye on the political scene, Camus continued to revise his *Caligula*, a play originally written and intended for staging at the *Théâtre de l'Equipe* in 1939, several times until its premiere in 1945 at the *Théâtre Hébertot*. Significantly, the three revivals of the play during the playwright's lifetime—1950, 1957, and 1958—showed that both his ideas and the world were undergoing dramatic changes. Postwar Parisian audiences could not fail to detect a Hitler-like dictator in *Caligula*. More recently, the play was performed in London at the Donmar Warehouse in 2003 and by the Ashes and Diamonds Theatre Company in 2012, with the British director Michael Grandage modeling his *Caligula* after Prime Minister Tony Blair.

One is tempted to note, however, that despite unmistakable references to the contemporary scene, adaptations like *Play Makbeth* or *Caligula* remain similar at the core with their classical models. The new text is inserted into the original version of Shakespeare or Camus, with the authority of performance and remarkable stagecraft conferred by an identifiable author, whose style and wordplay prove arrestingly matched to the current political crisis. Such outstanding productions are vastly praised in publications like Jan Kopecký's "Shakespeare's Forgotten Theatre: A Contribution to the Problems of the Theatre Today," whose focus is on the "gray zone" venues that encourage an "agreement between the stage and the audience (the conventions of creation and cognition) giv[ing] fiction the chance to exercise a real effect."¹⁹ This effect is an articulation of Dennis Kennedy's "danger and force"²⁰ impact of Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain, a process of dismissing a theater that fosters illusion and of instilling instead an

¹⁹ Jan Kopecký, "Shakespeare's Forgotten Theatre: A Contribution to the Problems of the Theatre Today," in *Charles University on Shakespeare*, ed. Zdenek Stříbrný (Prague: Universita Karlova, 1966), 5.

²⁰ Dennis Kennedy, "Introduction: Shakespeare without His Language" in *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*, ed. D. Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–18.

awareness between performance and the audience, which in turn projects the *mise-en-scène* unto the world beyond the stage.

Although such dramatic appropriations are politically strong, condemn dictatorships, and offer a common critical solidarity between the stage and the audience, they are still not autonomous works; instead, they are adaptations that use stage as independent productions of an original work and remain what W. B. Worthen calls “performative iterations.”²¹ Ultimately, they resonate with the canonical text into which they are grounded. By contrast, the Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian plays included in this book offer an extraordinary amalgamation that teases out of the classical source text a uniquely recreated world by the infusion of politics on traditional texts to generate a completely different dramatic environment whose set of meanings pertains to a specific culture and categories of temporality and location. More specifically, in the context of these three countries, such dramatic transcreations are not traditional plays. They do not offer a dramatic approach that builds a conflict like bricks added into a wall but rather they weave a fabric of accusations that in turn criticize subversively the political milieu within performances that combine ingeniously a pertinent ideological complexity and a comprehensive approach to the classical works to relocate the original play and enrich its content with added emblematic characters and political specificity.

An illustration is Matéi Vişniec’s *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Short Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold*, a play whose very title captures the essence of transcreation: Shakespeare’s tragedy of Richard III will speak to the audience in terms of the contemporary realities that make Meyerhold, the famous theater director, the protagonist of his own tragic life and death at the hands of Stalin’s executioners. The political paradigm is transferred from the Elizabethan playhouse to the space of the Soviet bloc, a process completed not only through the active exchange between the stage and the audience but also in the shift from Shakespeare to Vişniec in the dialogic force of the play. This approach finds resonance in the words of Romanian-born Hungarian playwright and dramaturg András Visky: the “praxis of

²¹ Worthen, *Authority of Performance*, 24.

theatre ... can open up discussion around past events that were not directly experienced by us, but have shaped our identity.”²²

The last word on transcreation in the context of this examination goes back to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and points to the moment when the Prince directs the actors freshly arrived at Elsinore to “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action”²³ when enacting “The Mousetrap,” the short play he inserts into their performance. Less concerned with the text, Hamlet is preoccupied with *the ultimate purpose of playing*, with ensuring that the theatrical discourse he inserts is effectively *political* in that the enactment of the play “hold[s] as ‘twere the mirror up to nature”²⁴ and covertly insinuates Claudius’s guilt and crime. After all, Hamlet has little to worry when it comes to “a speech of some dozen lines, or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert” in “The Murder of Gonzago.” His hope, however, is that the little play the actors are called to enact within the play is “the thing with which to catch the conscience of the King.” Hamlet’s adaptation is a catalyst for action: the impact of the sixteen lines is wholly political in nature as it jolts Claudius’s conscience, asserting the powerful role of theatrical performance as a strong, independent center of power and authority.

In his *Authority of Performance*, Worthen mentions the seminal essay “The Authentic Shakespeare,” in which Stephen Orgel asks, “What does a play represent?” He finds that each of the five plays he considers “makes claims to authenticity but means something quite different by the concept.”²⁵ Each also includes an embedded attitude toward the text that conditions, and ultimately determines, the terms of its realization.”²⁶ Letting the authentic Shakespeare stand behind the text and his plays act as an embodiment of theatrical memory, the embedded attitude of the eight plays I discuss highlights the way in which dramatic transcreation claims authority over and above the classical model and asserts proximity to something we value. In the case of an Eastern and Central European performance,

²² András Visky, “Barrack Dramaturgy and the Captive Audience,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2014), 467.

²³ William Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” in *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 3.2.17–18.

²⁴ Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” 3.2.21–22.

²⁵ Worthen, *Authority of Performance*, 29.

²⁶ Stephen Orgel, “The Authentic Shakespeare” *Representations*, 21 (1988): 1–25.

this “embedded attitude” is what the producers, performers and audiences of a given staging now take the play to mean—in other words, what we take the transcreation of a Shakespearean play to be all about, how the theatrical performance articulates Shakespeare’s creation within a historically changed political frame of reference.

The whole success of a transcreation is calibrated through reference to the text of the classical play and its literary identity, enriched and modified by a transcribed identity that lies outside and beyond the original play. The entire process encapsulated in the concept of old conflicts new dramaturgies takes the form of a comparison and contrast approach, in which the audience compares, contrasts, and then constructs based on the added level of signification which the theater audience now relates to the political context. To be sure, the autonomy of Shakespeare, which replicates a desire to be located in the original text, has always been ceded to literature. But the authority of performance in the cases of the transcreation, comes not from a relationship between the stage and Shakespeare or a classical play, but instead recognizes the specific interpretive contingency of theater to adapt politically to the new dramatic circumstances of Eastern and Central Europe where, as Worthen states in a different context, “performance has no intrinsic relation to the text.”²⁷

A particularly favored Shakespearean work, *Hamlet* is the play that yields itself to political treatment by revealing a tremendously radical potential. Even though the theater critics of the early Soviet era saw the Prince of Denmark as unable to reform an evil world and identified him as a mere harbinger of the future, Stalin intuited *Hamlet* to be a politically coded play and banned the performance as far back as 1928. His fears proved prophetic as in the countries of the communist bloc like Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, under the watchful eye of the censors, *Hamlet*’s less than transparent meaning struck a note that would resonate with countries filled with political prisons, spying, crimes, and deceit carried out at the highest levels of the Communist Party leadership, from János Kádár (Hungary), Nicolae Ceaușescu (Romania), and Todor Zhivkov (Bulgaria).

Alongside many of these departures from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as generous provider of models for what I call dramatic and literary trans-

²⁷ Worthen, *Authority of Performance*, 27.

creations are also the plays of Anton Chekhov, another towering master of the theater. In spite of the great time and social differences, Chekhov, who was extremely well versed in Shakespeare in translation, could use *Hamlet* in many of his plays by drawing from the classical model what Richard Gilman calls “a kind of creative morale.”²⁸ In many cases, the imaginative changes of Chekhov’s plays are signaled in the immediately recognizable Shakespearean quotes of such play as *The Seagull*. Thought provoking traces of *Hamlet* altered through dramatic effects that render the parallels more opaque are present in other plays like *Ivanov*, whose protagonist of the title is an inadequate Hamlet, or *The Cherry Orchard*, in which Lopakhin, one of the protagonists who recites verbatim from the Shakespearean original, is a much richer, politically and thematically local Hamlet variant.

Like Shakespeare, Chekhov was popular with the literary commissars and the severely restrictive Soviet censorship due to his humble origins. In a letter written on January 7, 1889, to Alexei Suvorin, his friend and publisher, Chekhov described himself as “the son of a serf,”²⁹ a family background that opened his work to crude political manipulation. The predominant Soviet attitude recommended him as a forerunner of the Bolshevik utopia, prefiguring in the twilight of Tsarist Russia the extinction of the exploitative and decadent landed gentry. Chekhov’s theatrical originality in rediscovering and reimagining Hamlet as a powerless individual transferred in various guises to the social environment of Tsarist Russia and plagued with indecision, inefficiency, and dour introspection is perhaps the most extraordinary example of dramatic transcreation. In addition to being an outstanding model for theatrical rediscovery, Chekhov’s rendering of the hapless Prince also explains why dramatists in Central and Eastern Europe had such a special affinity for Hamlet in the first place, perceiving him as a dramatic character entirely powerless in relation to the real powers of the communist era.

Marxism-Leninism posited that history, indeed the lives of people, were governed by scientific laws and that the existing regime of the Soviet Union embodied those laws. Thus, it was irrational to oppose the regime or to as-

²⁸ Richard Gilman, *Chekhov’s Plays: An Opening into Eternity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 38.

²⁹ Avrahm Yarmolinsky, ed., *Letters of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Viking, 1968), 107. In reality, Chekhov was the grandson of a serf; his father’s father having bought his own and his family’s freedom about twenty years before Anton’s birth in 1860.

sume that the citizens of the Soviet Union who toe-lined the state-mandated communist ideology could make mistakes, so it was not only unthinkable, but mainly irrational to oppose the regime.³⁰ And if Marxism-Leninism essentially criminalized non-conformity, heavy-handed state censorship denied people the very means for opposition. Censors, whose role in the Soviet Union could scarcely be overemphasized, were on constant alert for negative attitudes, rewrote history and falsified statistics. Ideological immersion in the canonical texts of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, whose works offered a worldview based on social justice and the pursuit of a better life for all, with a call for international solidarity against oppression everywhere, was extraordinary in its extent and depth. As Stephen Kotkin argues in *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, censors were “quintessential ‘social engineers’ ... in the battle to construct a communist society. The instructional messages emanating from reading matter, radio, and especially films were paralleled by training received in schools, including obligatory courses in Marxism-Leninism, beginning at an early age.”³¹

Enacted covertly beyond the barriers of state censorship, the highly conscious theatrical productions of the Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian theater charged with an implicit call to political resistance through the stage performance call for an examination of the region’s dramatic apparatus and for a critical consideration of the positioning of theater in the location of culture and politics. Built as a dramatic transcreation of the traditional plays of stage luminaries like Shakespeare, Molière, Verne, or Chekhov, the theater of Central and Eastern European proposes a repositioning of the pantheon plays of the classical repertoire to reclaim the specter of communism in order to understand the communist “other” through the critical probing into the deeper layers of the classical texts. The process of transcreation also recognizes the applicability of the condemnation of communism, of its grasp of absolute political power through brute force that violates universal moral standards. As in Stoppard’s political plays, there is an appeal within these eight plays to a sense of reality

³⁰ A particularly enlightening reading in this discussion is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s short story “We Never Make Mistakes.”

³¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 226.

of right and wrong, of the absolute quality of moral values that transcends ideology, culture, and time.

While serving as an important context for interpreting the region's politics and prompting interest in its political future, the plays of Central and Eastern Europe discussed here eliminate the hierarchies between the communist and postcommunist theater and see the past and present as fragmented and mutually permeating categories: the traces of communism coexist with and haunt the dramatic performance of a postcommunism that cannot relegate communism to its superseded past.

As in a theater hall, this critical incursion into the theater of Central and Eastern Europe is an invitation to "screw your courage to the sticking-place" (*Macbeth*) and come join in the exploration of unexpected stage travesties in the Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian theater by admitting the dialectics of digression in this cultural amalgam of theater, politics, and history. The case studies are intended to offer relative balance in terms of provenance, and include three Romanian plays, two Hungarian, and also two Bulgarian ones, with the addition of a play by Bulgakov, as a master of the politically subversive Russian theater in the Soviet era. In terms of the playwrights authoring these works, national identity and geographical location present a further complication, as two of the Romanian writers are exiles in the West, Matéi Vişniec being a long-time resident in France and Nic Ularu in the United States. These playwrights, however, have a direct experience of totalitarian regimes from a time before their departure, and in Vişniec's case his dissidence and subsequent exodus from Romania maps out a parallel process of anticommunist contestation. Vişniec has taken advantage of the possibilities offered by the freedom of speech in the West to talk openly about the conditions of communism in Romania, both before and after 1989, and in this sense, his dramatic output operates as only one facet of a broader intellectual and political commitment.

The book is structured into eight chapters, each dedicated to a major dramatic text. In addition, there is a number of thematic links, three of which have been highlighted to form independent clusters that reunite works from across the three countries and dramatic traditions, in a dialogue of sorts with one another. Thus, intertextuality with the French and Russian canon brings together plays by the Romanian Nic Ularu, the Russian Bulgakov, and the Hungarian György Spiró in Part 1. Part 2 addresses

innovative reimaginings of Shakespeare by the Romanian Matéi Vişniec, Hungary's Géza Bereményi, and Bulgaria's Nedyalko Yordanov. Finally, Part 3 draws on the parallels between political and religious exaltation, and considers the nature and role of Stalinist absolutism traced back to the Byzantine and medieval world through the work of the Romanian Vlad Zografi and the Bulgarian Stefan Tsanev.

Chapter 1 addresses the potential to recognize political transition (from Russia to the USSR) and communist discourse (through Marxist-Leninist slogans and Marxist theory). Using a clever dramatic travesty and framing device modeled after Chekhov's original rewriting of *Hamlet* to suit the Russian social milieu, Ularu's play maintains both the well-known topological configuration and protagonists of *The Cherry Orchard*, several of whom appear as ghosts, resurrected from Chekhov's Russia into a nascent Soviet Russia. The interaction between these fantastic characters and *A Sequel*'s "real" personages that Ularu tailors to suit communist specificity weaves a dramatic interrelation of literary, artistic, and political space in which Chekhov's outmoded gentry (a dying Ranevskaya) and socially undesirable upstarts (Lopakhin) grapple with an emerging Bolshevism.

In discussing the play, I show how "the rhetoric of anachronism"³² turns Ularu's play into an aesthetic experience and a historically engaged act, allowing the stage performance to explore the representation of history in juxtaposition with personal experience and to become a transparent metaphoricality through which to understand the cultural and political context of posthistory. Moreover, in Ularu's ostensibly critical play, the characters' actions offer a moral matrix, complete with immutable standards of right and wrong that reveal Bolshevism as morally bankrupt.

Framing the social critique emerging through Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Ularu stages *A Sequel* as a politically meaningful performance to a contemporary audience by inserting in the original play the brash beginnings of communism, which spelled demise for the old Russian gentry. Born in the early days of a freezing cold winter, the new communist state and its emissaries bring death and closure to Chekhov's orchard and its inhabitants.

³² Joseph Luzzi, "The Rhetoric of Anachronism," *Comparative Literature* 61 (2009): 69–84.

Chapter 2, which focuses on *A Cabal of Hypocrites* and *The Crimson Island*, is an examination of Bulgakov's plays seen as an adaptation of the nightmarish Soviet Union where the dramatist had no choice but to submit to the state's regimented censorship and to resign himself to accusations from official censors of being counterrevolutionary. I argue that Bulgakov remedially contrasts the dark (self)mythologizing process of the oppressive Soviet apparatus (Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie [GPU], Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh [NKVD], Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti [KGB], etc.) with a mythology of characters, fictional or real. *The Crimson Island* features Captain Grant, a character beloved by all those who, growing up in Eastern Europe, were enchanted by Jules Verne's tales of fantastic adventures, while *A Cabal of Hypocrites* resurrects in theatrical manner the figure of Molière, the playwright whose comedies were regularly performed on the Soviet stages.

If Molière's comedies appeared a facile manner of entertainment, science fiction was very much in tune with the Soviet ambition to conquer and control the world and Jules Verne, a writer sympathetic to the hard conditions of labor in the French mines, was a popular writer for entire generations of children in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Soviet bloc. Like Shakespeare's plays, however, Jules Verne's texts implied a theatrical, by which I mean dramatic, recoding of his stories, accenting the conflict between the transparent wall of illusion and the harsh realities of the colonial system. These two irreconcilable worlds juxtapose in Bulgakov's play the delights of an imaginary crimson island and the harsh conditions of life in the Soviet Union, where playwrights are subject to the rigors and humiliation of communist censorship and the rewriting of history to suit Stalinist ideology materializes humorously in the red flags storming victoriously on the shores of an Edenic Pacific island.

While I focus on the exotic crimson island as an escape from the daily indignities of Bulgakov's life in the communal apartment building on Sadovaya Street, I also argue that the play registers a satirical protest against the ludicrously arbitrary decisions of the Soviet censors with whom the dramatist was all too familiar from his engagement with the theater world in Moscow. Similarly, Bulgakov's depiction of Molière's suffering as a result of the disastrous effect that censorship and the entire political apparatus unleashed by a vindictive Catholic Church-affiliated brotherhood in Louis

XIV France echoes his own sadness at the cruelty of the Soviet system. The terror of the church imagining itself, like the Inquisition, to be an arbiter of universal values, staunchly determined to enforce its self-proclaimed righteousness throughout France, draws attention to the Communist Party's church-like status in the Soviet Union.

A man of the theater, Bulgakov had a vivid sense of writing his plays for the stage of history, so he circumvented censorship by allowing them, through the alchemy of culture and politics, to be remote enough not to be subversive. Yet *Crimson Island* mocks the rhetorical clichés of communism, with its ponderous abstractions of Marxist-Leninist ideology in a world empty of any artistic and aesthetic significance. And *A Cabal of Hypocrites* reveals by implied contrast that unlike the Inquisition, or any similar church-based organization, whose abuses (confiscation of coveted property, fines, the need to extract confessions, etc.) were directed at reclaiming souls and not at executions and permanent imprisonment, the tactics of the Stalinist terror did not aim to acquit or only to extract confessions of guilt; instead, the accused were shot or tortured to death almost immediately after having been arrested and confessing, or they were sent to perish in remote regions in permanent exile.

Chapter 3 zooms in on the Hungarian playwright György Spiró's fascination with the towering figure of eighteenth-century Polish actor Bogusławski becomes a dramatic opportunity to denounce censorship and Stalinist ideology in 1970s Hungary. Using an unexpected theatrical twist that adapts Molière's impostor to unmask the sham of Russia's appropriation of Poland, Bogusławski bypasses in Spiró's play both the theater director and the tsar's officials to enact in Russian-occupied Poland a courageous protest against the tsar.

Staged in 1979, the same year as Stoppard's *Cahoot's Macbeth*, Spiró's play translates into the reality of Soviet-occupied Hungary through a similar elaborate dialogue between stage and audience, between the space of life and the space of art. Using similar stratagems of allusion and disguised criticism, Spiró stages Bogusławski's manipulation of Molière's *Tartuffe* the same way as Stoppard, who recodes the language and action of the fictive *Macbeth* as a vehicle of dramatic design played on the interface between the stage and its world, allowing the audience to perceive in the Russian

annexation of Poland a covert condemnation of the Soviets' occupation of Hungary—a familiar type of approach for Central and Eastern European dramatic and literary transcreations, captured in the words of Jindřich Černý in reference to the staging of *Play Makbeth* in communist Czechoslovakia as “a world next to a world, the same world, our macbethian drama.”³³

Bringing a recognizable everyday life and the accents of that life into the world of drama, *The Impostor* risks further censorial intervention and retribution from the arbiters of cultural life in Stalinist Hungary as the play stages a clever, if covert, political protest against communism as a fake ideology and against theater directors who preferred to play things safe by staging Party-favored classics as a shield against political interference.

Like *Richard III*, which deals on the surface with English wars of the fifteenth century, primarily to address Shakespeare's anxieties stemming from England's war with Spain and the uncertainties of succession to the throne, Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* uses the protagonist director's putative staging of a Shakespearean classic to underscore the abuses of Stalinist censorship and ideological control not only in Soviet Russia but also in other countries of the Stalinist bloc, like Vişniec's native Romania.

Chapter 4 thus shows that in dramatizing Meyerhold's ordeal in directing *Richard III* to subversively denounce the perverse tactics of Stalinist terror, Vişniec brings to life more than the cruelty of a society organized around Stalin's paranoia and destructive power that claimed the lives of hundreds of artists like Meyerhold. On the next theatrical level, Meyerhold's putative play portrays Stalin as a monster whose barbarity far surpasses that of Richard III and his crimes—an awareness coupled with the Russian director's growing realization that the monstrosity of the Shakespearean protagonist is not ideologically motivated, that it lacks the Stalinist secular theocracy of ruling hypocritically in the name of the communist Ideal.

Engaged in the fictional process of staging Shakespeare's famous tragedy, Meyerhold traverses the whole range of Stalinist censorship, torture, and execution—from the objections of the state spies to the director's interrogation and suffering in prison and the sound of the typewriter clacking like an invisible machine gun when firing at its victim. The depiction of trauma

³³ Both a spectator and professional reviewer, Černý is quoted in Hana Worthen's “Within and Beyond: Pavel Kohout's Play *Makbeth* and Its Audiences,” *Gramma: A Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 15 (2007): 125.

evident in Meyerhold's blood-soaked shirt, intertwined with the phantasmagoric visits of the Generalissimo whose pipe identifies him with Stalin, divert attention from the personal to the political. In the spirit of a twisted Marxism seen as unabashed materialism, the Generalissimo's hypocritical interest in Meyerhold's art ironizes Stalin's purported role as a promoter of Soviet culture. With his leather coat and pipe more fitting for a petit bourgeois than for a communist leader, the Generalissimo's appearance conforms to the perception that the Soviets, traumatized by the stigmatizing legacy of backwardness, end up imitating and appropriating Western models of economic prosperity perceived as cultural emancipation.

While echoing the Shakespearean original, the stagings of *Hamlet* in communist Central Europe and post-Stalinist Russia mark a sustained theatrical effort to make up for the time when the play was banned in the USSR on Stalin's orders, from 1924 to his death in 1953. Chapter 5 demonstrates that even though they lacked the force to bring down these countries' communist governments, such *Hamlet*-based productions of the 1960s and 1970s in Central and Eastern Europe kept alive the artists' protest against censorship by valorizing the centrality and complexity of the Shakespearean classic in the context of an ideologically claustrophobic Soviet bloc.

I argue that, although Stalinist ideology eased up in Central Europe in the 1980s in contrast to the totalitarian occupation of the (de)centered Eastern Europe in countries like Romania and Bulgaria, in the 1960s and 1970s the political dislocation effected by Stalinism was equally horrifying even in the countries located, like Hungary, in the very center. A dramatic expression of the devastating situation is Géza Bereményi's *Halmi* (1979) plays out like a grotesque paraphrase of Sartre's *No Exit* applied to the expanded space of Central and Eastern Europe, with characters trapped in communist Hungary. Turned into a hellish place by the previous generations that have plunged the country into war, occupation, and devastation, the communist Hungary of Bereményi's play is a phantasmagoric, politically tainted setting that, like neighboring Romania and Bulgaria, offers no escape from the brute forces of Stalinist occupation.

With the events and dénouement of the play echoing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Halmi* is an updated version of the former, written at a time when experimental productions flourished in Budapest, competing directly with

the offerings of established theaters in the Hungarian capital. Like Hamlet, whose story litters the stage with dead flesh and leaves in its trail a ruined country, Halmi is the initiator of tragic actions that heap on the stage ruins and corpses, a pile of dead, drowned, poisoned, and mutilated bodies to suggest the grand failure of the monolithic and monumental body of communism. A latter-day Horatio, Bereményi tells the story at the unspoken bequest of Hamlet/Halmi, as he maps out in the play the wrecked world of Hungary, an infernal space of rotting matter at a time that is “out-of-joint.”

If Matéi Vişniec’s dramatic enactment of Meyerhold’s arrest, torture, and execution was modeled on a historical play of the classic repertoire to mark the final chapter of Stalin’s plan to crush the Soviet leading intellectual figures, Nedyalko Yordanov’s play *The Murder of Gonzago*—which is the focus of chapter 6—opens the stage for a dramatic and subversive representation of revolutionary violence, ingeniously interwoven in the intricate plot of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to show the horrors of enforced Stalinism in Bulgaria. Unlike Bereményi’s *Halmi*, which proposes a version of *Hamlet* enacted in late 1970s Hungary, Yordanov’s *Murder of Gonzago* offers a variation on the Shakespearean original produced almost a decade later, in 1988, near the end of a long period of communist rule. At this point the creation of an ideal state, a paradise on Earth for the nation as a community of the oppressed and underrepresented, had become as outlandish a notion as the belief in a great revolutionary, in this case Georgi Dimitrov, the Moscow-trained friend of Stalin, who returned to his native Bulgaria to dedicate his life to the working class.

My critical approach here is to examine Yordanov’s play as an organon (instrument) devised in the time immediately preceding the grand collapse of communism to reflect Bulgaria’s social, historical, and political reality the year before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Since the central characters of Yordanov’s play are the putative actors of the Shakespearean *Hamlet* who travel to Elsinore and end up staging not only *The Murder of Gonzago* but also *The Mousetrap*, Yordanov’s play should operate in punishing the trespassing actors the same way one operates in modern times when using a medieval torturing machine for extortion of confessions. In this space of Byzantine-Ottoman Turks continuity, the actors in *The Murder of Gonzago*, who are interrogated, tortured, beaten up and raped on orders given by a demented Claudius (a stand-in for Bulgaria’s communist leaders), provide

an exhibit which testifies to a time of Stalinist horrors enacted in a sad police-state, still bearing to the stage the terror of the medieval torturing machine brought to usage in communist Bulgaria.

Chapter 7 explores the interactions and relations between Europe's East and West through Vlad Zografi's *Peter or The Sun Spots*, which captures on an immediate level Tsar Peter the Great's despotic rule and depraved behavior during his visit to France in scenes that foreshadow, on an extended level, Stalin's autocratic system and thus suggest a direct lineage from the White to the Red tsar in modern times. I argue that the field of signification in Zografi's 1996 play, which reveals the reciprocity between Peter's Russia and Stalin's USSR, marks the political opening made possible in the theaters from the countries of the former Soviet bloc like Romania by the emergence of democratic regimes after forty-five years of enforced communism.

The play unveils in Peter's Russia a culture attracted by the idea of the nation-state, a place where the Orthodox Church plays a strong political role obeying not divine but political dictates, where secret services and spies maintain a system of fear, and where people tend to behave quite irrationally in submissive and degrading ways, allowing religion to become subordinate to the tsar's political interests.

Although Zografi's play reiterates Brodsky's claim that the communist regime is a continuation of tsarist imperialism whose motto was "Russia must rule ruthlessly,"³⁴ *Peter or the Sun Spots* far outplays tsarist tyranny at the game of cruelty and hypocrisy, suggesting subversively that the real dramatic space is that of a horrific USSR. In Zografi's play, Peter's two spies, Shalyapin and Smirnov, who regret not having in a long time had the chance "to castrate a heretical priest, or grill a rioter, or cut off a nun's tits," echo more recent accounts of the horrors beyond the Gulag, complete with Lavrentiy Beria's yearly quota of 75,950 executions in the early 1930s (later to be raised, according to Jonathan Brent's *Inside the Stalin Archives*), the beating to death of Stalin's political foes' teenage children, or the torture of the widows by having snakes placed in their prison cells.

I argue that Zografi's play further elucidates Brodsky's essayist explanation of Soviet aggressiveness and disrespect for human life in the name

³⁴ Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).

of the region's "irrational mystique," which merely shrouds unspeakable cruelties instead of making them comprehensible and accessible to the Western eye. By using the stage for the accumulated tensions of Peter's shrewd cruelty and amoral depravity that disregards "moral absolutes," Zograf's play leads to the inescapable conclusion that Russia is a country of a command-and-obedience system, where the only agency is that of absolutist rule and where no provisions are made for democratic governance or moral stewardship.

Staging a similar view of communist Bulgaria to Yordanov's *Murder of Gonzago*, Stefan Tsanev's *Other Death of Joan of Arc*—discussed in chapter 8—is another contemporary play that uses the violent history and intrigues of the medieval world to dramatize the dehumanizing regime that the Soviets, through the Kremlin faithful and native son Georgi Dimitrov, institutionalized in Bulgaria. The playwright relies on an ingenious cultural connectivity between France and Bulgaria to resurrect a jailed Joan of Arc in the final day before her execution. Through a dramatic theatrical extension that makes Joan a prisoner in France understood to be Bulgaria, Bulgaria is in fact much like the space of medieval France, invaded by the English in the 1400s in a similar bloody takeover to Bulgaria's appropriation by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II.

Adding to the play's dramatic development, which focuses on the Bulgarians' addiction to strong individuals like Dimitrov or Zhivkov, the two communist leaders who become the object of mass adoration in ways similar to those devised to glorify Ceaușescu in Romania, Bulgaria has become, after forty-five years of Stalinist control, not only a godless country but also a case study of a communist personality cult. In the genealogy of dramaturgical mappings I propose, two centuries after Peter the Great, when the Russian Orthodox Church followed the tsar's dictates, the contemporary Bulgarian Orthodox Church appears to have lost its control over religious practices, now more successfully implemented by a national communism that adapted them to ideology to serve the needs of state power.

Tsanev's clever theatrical impersonation of a disoriented God facing a nation that turns a communist hero cult into some kind of messianic worship and of a brutal and illiterate Executioner, able only to murder and rape while pondering over a warped version of the Ten Commandments, convey the image of France (Bulgaria) as a dungeon, where people crawl to

stay alive, give false testimonies under torture, and lick the feet of their English (Soviet) masters. Substituting the passion and death of Joan of Arc, the virgin turned into a saint, the “sanctification” of communist heroes into the national pantheon materializes in the transferring to Bulgarian ground the Soviets’ glorification of Lenin. On their own soil, Bulgarians build a Mausoleum for the embalmed Dimitrov, the “talented Leninist” and inspirer of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship, embalmed as the relics of communist saints.

PART 1
THE RUSSIAN AND FRENCH MASTERS

I.

The Political Ghosts and Ideological Phantasms of Nic Ularu's *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel*

In 2006, only a few years before the staging of Nic Ularu's play *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel* at the La MaMa Etc. Theatre in New York on February 21, 2008, Romania's president Traian Băsescu vehemently condemned communism, based on a 600-page "scientific report" concocted by a presidential committee put together for this purpose. In 2007 the outcome of this presidentially mandated report had been published under the title *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România. Raport Final* [The presidential committee for the analysis of communist dictatorship in Romania. Final report].³⁵ The 2006 speech of the then president Băsescu, preceded and followed by a strong revival of a wave of anticommunism in the Romanian public debates, was also picked up in important cultural journals, such as *Dilema*, 22, and *Observator cultural*. The new wave of anticommunist sentiment and discourse in Romania seemed to submit unconditionally to the moral imperative of condemning communism as a serious crime, going as far as to ban the insignia of the internationalist communist movement, the hammer and the sickle, and to attach to communism the official tattoo of "totalitarianism."

Little wonder then that such radical moral rejection of communism, perceived as inherently criminal in nature, also led to the pointing of fingers at Soviet communism and the Bolshevik Revolution, as the event that ultimately incited and made possible the triumph of political terror, ideological absurdities, and social displacement. After the collapse of communism was

³⁵ For a detailed account of the presidentially sponsored campaign against communism in Romania, see Alexandru Polgar "The Communist Remainder," in *Genealogies of Post-Communism*, ed. Adrian T. Sîrbu, Alexandru Polgár (Cluj: Editura Design and Print, 2009), 29–47.

welcomed by the nations throughout the world saluting the “peaceful” revolution in Hungary, the “palace” revolution in Bulgaria, and the fall of Ceaușescu’s totalitarian regime in Romania, communism and 1917 became particularly attractive to the stage world and playwriting. Plays were constructed to subordinate dramatic element to a virtual dialogue with the spectators and the plot provided an opportunity to talk about the politically oppressive communist era already familiar to the audience.

For Nic Ularu, a Romanian playwright who immigrated to the United States in 1996, a play like Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* offered all the ingredients that could dramatize in sequentially compressed dialogue and character portrayal the radical political rupture that severed the feudal ties that bound Russian people to the soil only to release them, in accelerated mode, into the violent motions of a revolution—a “revolution” in the Hegelian sense, that did not turn back (*re-volvere*), but turned in, causing an “inversion of the [Russian] soul upon itself.”³⁶ Or, as Marx insisted in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” a revolution that did no longer look back to the past for its inspiration, did not tolerate any regrets.³⁷

To a certain extent, then, Ularu’s play is a predictable manipulation of Chekhov’s text, especially because the selling of the cherry orchard leaves the original play open-ended. The vague announcement of Lopakhin’s plans to use the site for the construction of *dachas*, Ranevskaya’s return to Paris with her seventeen-year old daughter Anya and their libidinous servant Yasha, and the locking up of the family estate home with the servant Firs accidentally left inside indicate that the characters’ lives are not going to be the same, that the old order of things proves inadequate, and that there is no way back to the past. Yet Chekhov’s play lacks closure and exudes an ambiguous air that invites a coda, a sequel into the emerging new world underneath whose surface the old Russia was still showing through.

Life seems to resume beyond Chekhov’s text and to carry on in Ularu’s play effortlessly, within a parallel, tightly connected context rooted in the recognizable rhythms of the characters’ lives. In each of the two plays there is not so much change itself as the postulation of change. Each may be seen

³⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 111: 547.

³⁷ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: Norton, 1978), 598.

as a social and psychological study, a realistic work whose universal qualities make it legitimate and easy to transfer the characters and social milieu from one set of historical circumstances to another. Specifically, each play features a fateful encounter between socially representative groups—a doomed gentry and a member of the new socio-economic class in Chekhov's play and a historically incipient and improvident middle class exterminated brutally by the exponents of a radical ideology in the *Sequel*.

In the opening of Chekhov's play, Ranevskaya returns to her estate after five years spent in France, with her daughter Anya and the lecherous and pretentious servant Yasha. Young Petya Trofimov, in his student uniform, wire-rimmed glasses and speaking eloquently about the need to work while spending all his time in idleness, has also come to the estate two days earlier. At home are Leonid Gayev, Ranevskaya's idle brother, whose only activity is to practice billiard shots, Dunyasha the servant girl who seems attached to the accountant Yepikhodov but begins to flirt with Yasha, and the self-made local businessman Lopakhin, who reminisces about the past:

She [Ranevskaya] has been away for five years now ... She was always a good person. Very gentle, never caused a fuss ... I remember, when I was a kid ... my old man hit me ... in the face ... my nose started to bleed ... And Lyubov Andreyevna—she wasn't much older than I was— ... she brought me inside the house, right into the nursery here, and washed the blood off my face for me. "Don't cry little peasant," she told me, "you'll live long enough to get married."³⁸

The newcomers enter an atmosphere that their arrival has created as all characters starts supporting Ranevskaya's decision to sell the orchard to pay her debts. Because the orchard is connected with the mystique of the Ranevskys good old days, its forthcoming selling is the pivotal event that adds substance to the composition of the play and is at its center. All other aspects of the plot seem to dissolve into a web of enactments, the humming silences and the beckoning shadows, pointing to the impending loss of the family home.

³⁸ Paul Schmidt, trans., *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 333. All quotations are from this edition.

In *A Sequel*'s parallel construct, Ranevskaya returns from Paris, without Anya, who is said to be a prostitute in Paris, working for Yasha. Trofimov has arrived just before Ranevskaya. He is the same priggish and self-righteous young man, displaying the agitated conscience type of the emerging Bolshevik times. At the house things seem to be at a standstill. Gayev is now a decrepit old man, Dunyasha is married to Yepikhodov, the clerk and aspiring writer, and Lopakhin seems paralyzed with inaction. Having failed the bright promises of his entrepreneurial youth, Lopakhin has turned into a drunkard and a slob. Since the orchard is not fully developed, it has taken upon a purely decorative existence, a pivotal presence for the terminally ill Ranevskaya who has come back to the old family home to die.

Emphasized in both plays' titles and suggesting much more than an economic unit or living space for the family that inhabits it, the cherry orchard stands for the permanence of the Russian soil and the old gentry, the Ranevskys, who possess it. In both plays, the Ranevskys melodramatic rhetoric occupies centerstage and highlights the orchard as convenient backdrop for their erratic moods which translate into arbitrarily assigning a highly personalized meaning to a piece of land.

The original play, which Chekhov called a "piece of vaudeville,"³⁹ has been a cause for contention stemming from political stances on the right and left. To the right-wingers, *The Cherry Orchard* was a parody of cherished stereotypes (Ranevskaya, Lopakhin) as Joseph Andrew states in his informative *Russian Writers and Society*.⁴⁰ On the defensive side, leftist commentators denounced Trofimov for justifying capitalist exploitation and Lopakhin and Firs for idealizing idle and decadent aristocracy. Adding to the cultural discussion, Vladimir Korolenko, a presumed friend of Chekhov, described Ranevskaya as an "aristocratic slut," whom Chekhov "whitewashed with a sort of sentimental halo."⁴¹

³⁹ Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, *My Life in the Russian Theatre* (London: Geoffrey Bles 1968), 209.

⁴⁰ Joseph Andrew, *Russian Writers and Society in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* (London: McMillan, 1982), 178.

⁴¹ Michael Heim and Simon Karlinsky, trans., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 443.

The sweet melancholic view of play has perennially centered on the orchard as an important stage, on which the Ranevskys are acting out their lives with the household servants seen as no more than theatrical props. After all, since the days of Peter the Great who looked upon his elaborate capital St. Petersburg as a theater, the excesses of the Russian aristocracy and their propensity for *mise-en-scène* moments, dictated that they prepare themselves to act out their lives. Like Eugene Onegin who “at least three hours peruses / His figure in the looking-glass”⁴² before going out, the Russian gentry acted like actors before an audience, with every pose and gesture carefully scripted for the *beau monde* to observe their performance.

Frowning upon such cultivated excesses, Chekhov famously articulated his antimelodramatic mode of expression in his recommendation to Maxim Gorky that the latter show more restraint: “First of all, in my opinion,” Chekhov writes, “you lack restraint. You are like a spectator in a theater who is so unrestrained in the way he expresses his enthusiasm that he prevents himself and others from listening ... The effect you create is not of expansiveness, nor of a broad sweep of your brush, but merely lack of restraint.”⁴³ Consistently in his plays Chekhov ridicules the protagonists’ excessive self-expression and regards their lack of restraint as an underlying flaw of the Russian character translated into the exaltation of his protagonists from *The Seagull* to *Uncle Vania*, and *The Three Sisters*. In a letter dated December 30, 1888 to his friend and publisher Alexei Suvorin, Chekhov points specifically to the Russian propensity for seeing everything in the extreme, the predilection for excesses as a key to malaise and failure personified by the title character of his play *Ivanov*:

Russian excitability has one specific quality: it is quickly replaced by exhaustion. A man, just off the school bench, rashly takes on a burden beyond his powers ... makes speeches, writes to the minister, struggles with evil, applauds the good, does not fall in love simply but inevitably with either bluestockings or psychopaths or Jewesses or even prostitutes whom he saves, etc. But hardly has he turned over 30 or 35, he begins to

⁴² Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. J. Falen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15.

⁴³ Lillian Hellman, ed., *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1984), 228–9.

feel weariness and boredom ... Disillusion, apathy, nervous instability and exhaustion are the inevitable consequences of excessive excitability, and this excitability is characteristic of our young people to an extreme degree.⁴⁴

Throughout *The Cherry Orchard* everyone displays a similar type of flaw, a behavior leaning toward excess. Returning to the home of her childhood, upon being asked if she remembered the nursery, Ranevskaya explains through tears: "The nursery! Oh, this house, this beautiful house! I slept in this room when I was a child. (*She weeps.*) And I feel like a child again."⁴⁵ She is just as effusive about the orchard:

Oh, my childhood! My innocence! I slept in this room, I could look out over the orchard, when I woke up in the morning I was happy, and it all looked exactly the same as this! Nothing has changed! (*Laughs delightedly*) White, white, all is white! My whole orchard is white!⁴⁶

Like her mother, Anya too is moody, impressionable, talks and giggles "like a little girl," interjecting the conversation with the likes of "You know what? In Paris I went for a ride in a balloon."⁴⁷ Adding to the melodramatic excesses, Ranevskaya's brother Gayev talks too much, the pratfalls and gaucheries of Yepikhodov are unnerving, Yasha's exaggerated snobbery is laughable, and so on. Containing the tears and joys, and playing on the forced gaiety that borders on despair, the Jewish band to which the characters dance seems to artfully balance the tensions. Ordered as a gallant gesture to entertain for the party at the opening of Act III, the gypsy band also resonates with quixotic undertones that capture and epitomize Lopakhin's own exaltations. Once he becomes the master of the orchard, he exclaims, "My God, the whole orchard belongs to me! Tell me I'm drunk, tell me it's all a dream, I'm making this up—(*Stomps the floor*) And don't anybody laugh! Come on, musicians, play!"⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Hellman, *Selected Letters*, 70.

⁴⁵ Schmidt, *The Plays*, 335.

⁴⁶ Schmidt, *The Plays*, 344.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

Like Chekhov, Ularu spotlights the characters' exaltation on display at the time of the ideologically troubled days of a dying old Russia. Born out of the unchecked emotions into which the older generation was already steeped, a rising Bolshevism appears in Ularu's play as the new type of excess shaping Russian identity. After all, some of the most vivid exaltations in Chekhov's play belong to Petya Trofimov, the perennial student who deeply moved by Anya's sweet innocence calls her "My sunshine! My springtime!".⁴⁹ His strong proclamations in *The Cherry Orchard* mark an early transition into the brutal political activism underlying his impromptu speeches:

Remember, human beings are constantly progressing, and their power keeps growing ... Most people in this country aren't working toward anything. People I come into contact with—at the university for instance—they're supposed to be educated but they're not interested in the truth. They are not interested in much of anything, actually ... just look at the cities they live in. Miles and miles of slums, where people go hungry and where they live packed into unheated tenements full of cockroaches and garbage, and their lives are full of violence and immorality ... All you find is dirt and ignorance and crime.⁵⁰

Added to the palimpsestic references that bridge the two plays, Trofimov's outbursts dramatize a sequencing of events that not only ease a credible transition from Chekhov's play but also prefigure the radical changes of the decade following Chekhov's death and highlighted in Ularu's *A Sequel*. If on an immediate level *The Cherry Orchard* appears to dramatize an archaic type of community steeped in the moral turpitude of an agrarian caste society dominated by "a nest of gentry" that had been in the Russian imaginary since Turgenev's time, Ularu stages in *A Sequel* an intertext with characters that fulfill primarily a historical and political function, dramatizing the accelerated changes from a feudal caste society to a communist order.

Subtly ironic and iconoclastic, Chekhov too challenged the mystique of the old gentry. A doctor by training and inclined to look at practical solutions

⁴⁹ Ibid., 349.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 357.

rather than to religion or ideologies, as illustrated in his veiled attack on Leo Tolstoy in 1894, when he wrote that “there is more love of humanity in electricity and steam than in vegetarianism,”⁵¹ Chekhov believed in progress and saluted modernity for Russia, even if he had an uncertain opinion on the role of intellectuals. *The Cherry Orchard* begins and ends with a train journey, and the railway appears as an undeniable sign of modernity in the play at a time when in Russia the developing of the railroads was leading to the rise of the capital Moscow and the demise of provincial towns with their satellites of gentry farmers, like the Ranevskys, who depended on the small towns to consume their grains. In *A Sequel* the train is once again a subtle announcer of change. It brings the old Ranevskaya home once again, this time without Anya and on a one-way journey to her death. It also brings the agents of political change: Trofimov, who returns to ask Lopakhin to be silent about his past infatuation with Anya and his former status as a protégé of Ranevskaya because he is hoping to be appointed a cultural secretary for the region, and the sinister Comrade Boris, the commissar of Bolshevism, whose mission is to gather data about Trofimov’s past. To Ularu’s audience, such a background check alludes to the effective spying and interrogations spearheaded by the political commissars in earnest search of the enemy within, that generated the omnipresent terror of Stalinism in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

Foreshadowing the central ideology of Bolshevism, hard core Stalinist tactics, Party rhetoric, and aberrant politics disguised as class struggle, the changing political and social climate of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution is enacted in Ularu’s play specifically through the exploration of the relationships amongst characters in the performative present of the communist takeover. Thus, Ularu aims to convey the essence of communism rather than to carry out a public denunciation of it in the manner achieved by Soviet dissident writers such as Solzhenitsyn. The ideological cleavages between the two attitudes of the moment—the emerging Bolshevism, with its rampant individualism and its false consciousness of abstract liberty and collective good, on the one hand, and the alienated, well-entrenched, and archaic feudalism, on the other, invite only two possible responses for

⁵¹ Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Holt, 2002), 207.

Ularu's characters to the turmoil of history: the terrorist revolutionary action portrayed by Comrade Boris or the refusal/inability to act personified by Lopakhin as a character threatened with extinction in the thematically and temporally context of an emerging communist era. It is precisely the dramatic intersection of these two responses that results not only in the Bolshevik Revolution's violent overthrow of the agrarian caste society, but also in the demise of superfluous characters like Lopakhin, who plays the role of an eternally inefficient, latter-day Hamlet in a play that turns the stage into a "force-field for transparency and metaphoricity"⁵² through which the representation of history is in juxtaposition with personal experience in an exquisite literary and dramatic transcreation.

Complicating recognizable aspects of history through its characters, Ularu's play offers on an immediate level an ingenious rewrite of the Chekhovian original. The framing device maintains both the well-known topological configuration and the protagonists of *The Cherry Orchard*, but several of them appear now as ghosts. The interaction between these fantastic characters and the "real" personages weaves a scenic interrelation of literary, artistic and mental space, a half and half or mezzo-text, not only literally but also in terms of life-death perception. The construction of tone and texture and its antiphonal dialogue resonate in *Sequel* with the bittersweet music of ambivalence, of half-real, half textual references. As one of the characters in Ularu's play remarks tongue-in-cheek, the characters of *A Sequel* remind him of a Chekhov play, being drawn from *The Cherry Orchard*'s illiterate and pious peasantry and their feudal masters, like Ranevskaya and her family, the old servant Firs, or the more recent owners of primitive accumulation, like the upstart Lopakhin. What Chekhov's contemporaries perceived as the last vestiges of the bygone days in the fate of the Raneskys certainly resonated with the spirit and political agenda of their times. In Moscow, such an illustrious personage as Count Pavel Sheremetev stated that "our country nests are carrying the ancient torch of culture and enlightenment. God grant them success, if only they are spared the senseless movement to destroy them, supposedly in the interest of social justice."⁵³

⁵² See Joseph Luzzi, "The Rhetoric of Anachronism," *Comparative Literature* 61 (2009): 69–84. Luzzi's contribution discusses the type of rhetoric Ularu uses in his play.

⁵³ Quoted in Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 209.

Yet Chekhov was insistent that his play should be performed as a comedy. Throughout *The Cherry Orchard* the tone is ironic and iconoclastic in the treatment of the gentry and its display of sentimental clichés. The audience is meant to laugh when Lyubov Ranevskaya exalts the lost beauty of the old estate and reminisces in emotional outbursts about her happy childhood there. This is, after all, a world she had abandoned long ago for France. Her excessive nostalgia is quickly forgotten and subtly belied by the speed with which she quickly forgets her grief. It is difficult to perceive her situation and laments as a tragedy; more to the point, as Orlando Figes points out, *The Cherry Orchard* “is a satire of the old-world gentry and the cult of rural Russia and the world that grew up around it.”⁵⁴ Chekhov’s own comments reveal that he felt nothing but contempt for such a world. While writing *The Cherry Orchard* during a visit at Maria Yakunchikova near Moscow, Chekhov noted: “A more disgracefully idle, absurd and tasteless life would be hard to find. These people live exclusively for pleasure.”⁵⁵

In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin’s character is intended to be the hero, and an antidote of sorts to the idle classes. Chekhov portrays him as an honest businessman, kind and generous underneath his peasant-like appearance and serf roots. Like Lopakhin, Chekhov had merchant roots, with a father who had risen from the enserfed peasant class. Unsympathetic to the old world, Chekhov embraced in the play the cultural changes and social transformation that emerged in Russia at the dawn of the twentieth century through upstarts like Lopakhin.

Ignoring Chekhov’s intentions, and even directions, Konstantin Stanislavsky, the director of the Moscow Art Theatre, staged the first performance of *The Cherry Orchard* as a sentimental tragedy. Although the son of a merchant family himself, Stanislavsky chose to play the role of the decrepit Gayev to resonate with the cult of a rural civilization on the brink of a cruel extinction caused by the social revolution of the emerging towns. In keeping with the existing stereotype of the merchant class, Stanislavsky directed the portrayal of Lopakhin as that of a fat, badly dressed, and loud-mouthed personage, a directorial decision that left Chekhov’s play without

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 210.

a hero and led Vsevolod Meyerhold to conclude that "when the curtain falls one senses no such presence and retains only the presence of 'types.'"⁵⁶

Ularu's appropriation of Chekhov's original play maintains Stanislavsky's unappealing portrayal of Lopakhin and, in addition, dramatizes an "afterlife" of dramatic perspectives and political ramifications that are only simmering in its famous antecedent. Although Chekhov may have intended Lopakhin to be a likable character in the imaginative space of the play, remotely modeled after his own humble origins, he must have also felt that the tide was turning against such a class, that such a class was becoming superfluous even in its wake.

The question of the superfluous man as a type of social being was much discussed in Russian and intellectual circles of the late nineteenth century. According to Richard Gilman, "such a person, usually from the upper class not necessarily confined to it, with some level of higher education, was characterized as having a feeling of purposelessness, having nothing on which to exercise his talents, not belonging anywhere; in short, he ... was seen to be suffering from what we might now call a vague existential crisis, but a condition with definite sociological roots."⁵⁷ Such a figure, as Gilman points out, "could also derive from other imaginative sources, notably Hamlet, a character made famous by similar powerlessness/idleness in his social role in relation to the powers of advancing times forcing impossible changes upon him."

Chekhov's wish to address the question of the superfluous man is reflected in *Ivanov*, a play whose protagonist he also mentions in connection with excesses that seem to be a tragic and identifiable flow of the Russian character. Ivanov is a thirty-five-year-old land owner in an unnamed province in central Russia who for no apparent reason has lost his one-time enthusiasm and energy, his moral bearing and his self-esteem. "There was a time I worked hard and thought about a lot of things, but I was never tired. Nowadays I do nothing and think about nothing, but I'm exhausted in body

⁵⁶ Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood," in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. Edward Braun (London: Bloomsbury, 1969), 29.

⁵⁷ Richard Gilman, *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 39.

and soul.” Unable to extricate himself from the gloom in which he is enveloped, he cries in agony, “I feel paralyzed, half-dead or something.”⁵⁸

There is much of Ivanov’s spiritual inertia in Ularu’s Lopakhin, who is virtually unrecognizable in *A Sequel*. The excessive joy celebrating the purchase of the orchard and the enthusiasm for its future development at the end of Act III of *The Cherry Orchard*—“I’m going to chop down every tree in that cherry orchard ... and then I’m going to develop that land! Watch me! I am going to do something our children and grandchildren can be proud of”⁵⁹—are now completely reversed. This Lopakhin is dramatically disfigured by melancholic lapses and concessions as he indulges in excessive drinking, refuses to wash, reminisces about Ranevskaya and even sends her money for a train ticket to come back home.

Seen from the postcommunist present, Ularu’s pitiable Lopakhin, just like the decrepit Ranevskys, is forced to confront the hollowness of the new times, with their political and social extremes. His ineffectuality, dour introspection, and self-loathing seem to be a reenactment of a clichéd Hamlet echoed by Chekhov’s Ivanov who declares: “I could die of shame when I realize that I’m turning into some kind of Hamlet, a completely superfluous man.”⁶⁰

As a Hamlet variant transposed in *A Sequel*, Ularu’s Lopakhin is also the Chekhovian embodiment of the superfluous man, paralyzed with inaction in the present confrontation with Bolshevik ideology and the political crimes generated by a brutally emerging Soviet order which, ironically, had its political beginnings in the first agrarian revolution of 1905 that swept through Russia only a year after the staging of *The Cherry Orchard*. Denounced for being “insensitive, selfish, cold and heartless,” Chekhov’s Ivanov ends his life by shooting himself; Ularu’s Lopakhin, whose character in *A Sequel* presents an even more pervasive case of apathy and moral drift, confronts the same destiny. In both cases, there isn’t anything that can be done about their suicide except to play the scene as unstridently as possible, with a sound of a gunshot heard in the background.

More complex than a quaint relic of its great Russian model whose only merit is that of resurrecting ghosts, *A Sequel* foreshadows a new political

⁵⁸ Schmidt, *The Plays*, 77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 373.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 77.

and social order in the revamped character identity of Petya Trofimov and Yepikhodov, whose actions are filtered through what Luzzi calls "the rhetoric of anachronism." Ularu's appropriation of Luzzi's technique provides a correction against any attempt to reduce *A Sequel* to a mere palimpsest of Chekhov's masterpiece. Enriched by the ingenious insertion of a political dimension, Ularu's play is both an aesthetic experience and a historically engaged act, constructed as a ghost story on multiple political levels: populated by the ghost of Bolshevism brought to the cherry orchard at the twilight of Tsarist Russia, *A Sequel* features not only the ghosts of the dead characters, the servant Firs and Ranevskaya's son Grisha emerging from Chekhov's play, but also the phantasms of an incipient communism. The latter are in turn shrouded in death after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise and condemnation of communism in the countries of the Soviet bloc, and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union that Ularu had personally witnessed in the postcommunist present.

In the opening of Ularu's play, the characters on stage display a lack of moral courage to face their problems and an amazing absence of will. Lopakhin, the greedy arriviste, who had purchased Ranevskaya's cherry orchard in Chekhov's play to better his social condition and to liquidate her debts, is now an aging proprietor whose hopes for a better life have failed to materialize. He lives alone, wallows in his infatuation for Ranevskaya, and continues to hope that she will return to see her aging brother, Gayev, who goes to the railroad station every day to be there just in case she happens to return. Dunyasha, Ranevskaya's servant maid who had been impregnated by the caddish Yasha in Chekhov's play is now married to Yepikhodov, Lopakhin's rather dull accountant, who also fancies himself to be a very talented writer and poet and who seems to be unfazed by Dunyasha's infidelities and nagging.

The conflict of *A Sequel* reiterates the right and the left oppositions foregrounded in Chekhov's play in the confrontation between the Ranevskys, Lopakhin, and Firs, on the one hand, and Petya Trofimov and Comrade Boris, on the other. In slightly altered version, such oppositions stand for Russia's old world of landed gentry, upstarts, and archaic peasantry and for the homegrown intellectuals and fanatic hardliners responsible for the gradual spread of Bolshevism. If these two groups belong to easily discernable political sides of the old, Tsarist Russia and the new, Bolshevik

Russia, respectively, the character of Semyon Panteleyevich Yepikhodov, Lopakhin's dimwitted clerk and aspiring writer, spotlights the inability of ordinary folks to comprehend the class struggle and abstract ideologies of a changing world. In the conversation that opens Ularu's play, Yepikhodov and Lopakhin reflect the general confusion and worrisome occurrences of the Russian political scene:⁶¹

LOPAKHIN: ... we are living disturbing times; the revolution and the Civil War made all these people move to the countryside because they were starving in town. They are desperate ...

YEPIKHODOV: I hear that the Bolsheviks are prosecuting, deporting or killing the rich people; especially the ones who had ties with the White Guard ... You should be scared too.

LOPAKHIN: I'm rich but I'm not an aristocrat, I'm just a merchant and a peasant. The Bolsheviks only kill aristocrats. It's true that I've sold some grain to the White Guard but that's just business. I'm just a merchant selling my products ... and besides, the Civil War has ended.

YEPIKHODOV: Permit me to contradict your opinion, so to speak ... They say everybody must be equal: "no rich people anymore!"

Central to Ularu's play is the idea of ownership, with the cherry orchard once again of singular importance as a spatial entity marked by "landed interest." This time, however, the cherry orchard's land represents the restricting hold of the past and reflects for the new Bolshevik order what Marx called the "earthy [representation and] conditions" of economic production of feudalism.⁶² As Chekhov's play ends, Lopakhin acquires the orchard and prepares to use most of the land for construction, in an apparent attempt to dissolve the economic ties to the land—a rather timid move to turn from the feudal past to the modern present. However, at the start of Ularu's play significantly titled *A Sequel*, Lopakhin still lives in the old house, unable to break away. Moreover, his ownership ties, despite the new homes built on the land formerly occupied by the orchard, still reflect an agrarian society dominated by individual control and attachment to the

⁶¹ Nic Ularu, *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel* (Cluj: Cartea Casa Cărții de Stiință, 2012), 19. All quotations are from this edition.

⁶² Karl Marx, "The German Ideology: Part I," in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 166.

land. This type of ownership, which is a far cry from capitalist enterprise, is about to be transformed, before it can mature into capitalist enterprise, through an accelerated and violent uprooting of natural ties to the land, into an abstract, collective ownership that inaugurates and guarantees the survival of the communist state and punishes the private owners with heavy prison sentences and worse. Reluctant to accept that as an owner he too is certain to be expropriated and, most likely, to be punished on account of his private property, Lopakhin is unable to fathom the radical measures of the new communist order. He is equally unequipped to discern the end of the old world in which he finds what little solace he can muster in his primitive accumulation of wealth and his infatuation with the good old days sublimated for him in the mystique of Ranevskaya.

Having been “cured” of his capitalist impulses, Ularu's Lopakhin is still bound to the soil and lives in the decaying aristocratic house formerly occupied by the Ranevskys. Unwilling to move in the new villas built on the grounds of the old cherry orchard, Lopakhin fits comfortably into Chekhov's profile of the superfluous man, living with the now senile and decrepit Gayev in the old space of the orchard among the ruined furniture. Both seem to vegetate in a world at the verge of annihilation, aware of their own complicity in this annihilation and drowning their sorrows in excessive drinking. As the only sign of vitality, in addition to the consumption of more than his share of vodka, Lopakhin has stinking feet and bad body odor and is thus in violation of the time-honored tradition of the *banya*. As Yepikhodov points out, the bathhouse in the Ranevskys decrepit home has been in disrepair for the past ten years and Lopakhin refuses to wash in the public bathhouse.⁶³ He also plays unwitting host to two ghosts that prompt *A Sequel's* romantic associations with Chekhov's original play: Firs, the former servant of Gayev, and Grisha, Ranevskaya's son who had drowned in childhood while foolishly trying to impress his tutor, Petya Trofimov. In the dramatic present of *A Sequel*, Firs and Grisha haunt the house and reflect upon the hypnotizing past.

⁶³ Going to the *banya* was an old medieval Russian custom, seen popularly as a national institution. According to Figes, in *Natasha's Dance*, not to bathe at least three times a week was practically taken as a proof of severe trespassing. Every noble house had its own steam house, and in towns and villages there was invariably a communal bath.

Fifteen years after his death, Firs (whose character is a stand-in for the oppressed common man of precommunist Russia) is unable to forget his God-given obligations and worries that the now decrepit Gayev does not dress warmly enough; Grisha, the wet ghost, is a vampiric image of the past, the master and putative heir to the estate who tries to maintain a loose control over the house by playing tricks on its inhabitants. Adding to all these characters' determination to hold on to their past lives, the ludic ghosts of Firs and Grisha also suggest the ineffectual role of the past to avert or impact the Bolshevik Revolution and abrupt communist takeover. Convincingly tunneled as figures for Russia's predictable descent into Bolshevism, all the characters in Ularu's play in which ghosts and the living share the same space seem encapsulated in their inability to dissociate themselves from the land, acting as merely dumb casualties in the foretold trajectory of Stalinism.

Together, these passive characters are a repository of memories unfolding over an extraordinary place, the cherry orchard and the old house, in which the past, present, and future are condensed into history—a place where the undead and a nostalgic mode meet in posthistory, in the performative junction of linear time and circularity. As it immediately becomes apparent, Lopakhin is still infatuated with Ranevskaya and even sends her money to return to Russia. Firs continues to believe that “God will punish me if I were to speak badly about my masters,”⁶⁴ and Gayev spends all his time waiting for the departed Ranevskaya and drinking heavily with the vagabonds at the railroad station, in spite of his declining health and old age.

The *Sequel's* sense of terror and helplessness enters historicity further with the arrival of Pyotr Sergheyevich Trofimov and Comrade Boris, whose presence intercuts the play with close-ups of communist ideology and political intervention. Resurrected from Chekhov's play, Trofimov is now an ardent communist and loyal Marxist. Concerned that his past may affect his pending Communist Party promotion to “cultural propagandist,” Trofimov is trying to hide his former associations from Comrade Boris, the cruel and demented hard-liner who controls the region through Stalinist tactics and whose mission of the moment is to research Trofimov's past. It is worth mentioning in this context that reliable documentation on each

⁶⁴ Ularu, *Orchard*, 16.

communist was essential to ensure both status and loyalty in the Party—in essence to avoid the accusation of being a class alien, that is a disloyal communist to the working class or proletariat. A concealed or less than immaculate past or withholding any information from the Party were both grave and punishable trespasses that triggered swift and harsh punishment, like expulsion from the Party or severe reprimand, under the generic accusation of being a “moral degenerate.” To be accepted into the Party or to be considered for any position within its hierarchy, one had to undergo a thorough, labor-intensive scrutiny known as a process of verification of the type Comrade Boris is sent out to conduct on Trofimov.

Having turned into a knight fit for a hammer-and-sickle crusader in search of converts to the new doctrine, Trofimov hopes to pass this background check. However, he is aware that a simple allusion to his ties with the Ranevskys would make him look like an unworthy communist, and that Comrade Boris’s conversation with anyone at the Ranevskys’ home could turn into a potential trap that would incriminate him. Seized with fear, he pleads with Yepikhodov: “Now, when Comrade Boris comes here, please don’t mention any stories about me and Anya, or anything regarding my links with this family. And especially the fact that Lopakhin tried to help me with money. This will put me in danger. Do you understand? They want to promote me in the propaganda system and I am afraid.”⁶⁵

In his attempts to circumvent his all-around vulnerability in the investigation and to incur further favor with the Party, Trofimov also turns to recruiting the perennially dimwitted Yepikhodov, with promises that Party membership will make him “happier and healthier” and will consecrate him as “more of a writer than Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky” once he becomes a communist. Caricatured as a country folk type—naive, gullible, and slow-witted—Yepikhodov embraces Trofimov’s assurances that he would become a great writer in an exchange that awakens the audience to the serious depth of communist lies, to the lost illusions and wasted expectations of those who joined the Party after being lured with false promises.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 29.

YEPIKHODOV: Oh my God, I will be a professional writer, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, I can't believe ...

TROFIMOV: You are more than them, Yepikhodov, you are a communist! And you are alive! They're dead ...

YEPIKHODOV: But I am not a communist, Petya ...

TROFIMOV: From now on you are! Write the name of your father here ... the address here ... draw a line here, that's for a description of your properties. Sign here, and here. Now you need to pay your dues, one ruble a month, and I will give you your red membership card.⁶⁶

In similar ways, Trofimov's journal that Grisha reads out loud offers glimpses of communist ideology through citations and quasi-citations that reverberate with their slogans of Marxist-Leninist propaganda: "Pleasure is a weapon designed by capitalists to facilitate the proletariat's continuous servitude"; "Sexual abstinence becomes especially desirable when new forms of governmental life are being created ... Sexual abstinence is the key to defeat the capitalists"; "I love my big factory / I love it with all my soul / It is dearer to me than anything / Dearer than my own mother / Dearer than any beauty / I love it, I love it, I love it ... only sexual abstinence can drive one to worship our industry."⁶⁷

Subject to ridicule, communism's main tenets reiterate for the informed spectator of postcommunist Romania the central proposition of Stalinist ideology: communism as antidote to capitalism. More succinctly, this simply meant that achieving the communist dream was predicated on eradicating capitalism, a view that imparted a sense of experience to the experience of communism, despite the obvious improvisations in all sectors. No matter the location or conditions, the Soviet Union brought along their banners and their slogans, their agitprop newspapers, their ambitious factories and five-year plans, and the collective lives of the masses crowded into dining rooms and Stalinist apartment buildings. Beloved by peasants and workers above their own spouses, children, or parents, was the Great Father of Nations, Comrade Stalin, the leader who was spearheading the on-going creation of the communist civilization based on the rejection of capitalism.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 64–5.

Through these snappy ideological patches, Ularu's play engages the audience in the activity of digging out the linguistic bones and relics of communism, not only so that they can be given a proper burial place but also in order to put in perspective old wounds by forcing the flesh open to dig through all the layers of blood and suffering. In *A Sequel*, historical events gush forth from the wounds of communist history and are legitimized as political truths by the very virtue of their irrationality and horror. Disseminated throughout the play in traumatic moments of compressed cruelty, the shooting of Ranevskaya by Comrade Boris or the sound of the gunshot that announces Trofimov's suicide when forced to commit murder in the name of communist principles, functions as indices of the time when history explodes; trauma is registered as a historical signal that encompasses the congealed eventfulness of history with which spectators are supposed to interact. By invoking Comrade Boris's cruelty in shooting an old, ailing woman, *A Sequel* produces an active form of despair that makes spectators aware of history and aware of themselves. Through ludic complicity, they perform the Benjaminian "Jetztzeit" while simultaneously experiencing the horrors of the traumatic communist era.

As the play ends, Comrade Boris is caught in a winter blizzard and ends up hallucinating and moving in circles, unable to find his way back—a dramatic parallel in Ularu's play of the rupture that Marx, when speaking about the radical and irreversible break with the past caused by revolution, termed "the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions ... the rupture that would make all turning back impossible...the revolutionary point of departure."⁶⁸ It is in this vein that we are to understand the lesson of *A Sequel*: that the historical present is frozen after the violent rupture with the past, allowing us to read the inscriptions of the communist experiment emphasized in the theatrical performance as recognition of our collective misguided political choices and as remembrance of historical events. When the cruelty of past events gushes forth into the performative present of *A Sequel*, when history explodes in the gunshots of political and social changes, postmodern theater performance takes place as a reiterative performance of history. As Ularu's play indicates, this reinscription of history can significantly shape the postmodern theatrical practices of Central and Eastern Europe.

⁶⁸ Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Tucker, *Marx-Engels*, 500.

Comrade Boris's death in the freezing cold in *The Sequel's* finale also blurs the dramatic thrust of the play suggesting the sclerotic end of communism that offers neither solutions nor remedy—only tragic fatalities in the midst of the cold Russian landscape. Like Marxism-Leninism, the young Red engineers like Trofimov, and the despotic proletarian dictatorship, the self-authorization of comrade Boris's political engagement that prompts him to proclaim hallucinatory communist clichés—"We'll be a superpower and we'll crush the capitalists and their rotten society! And their skyscrapers"; "Comrade Stalin is great! He is the father of Russia"⁶⁹—drains away life and fosters monstrous crimes, symbolically suggested by his senseless shooting of a dying Ranevskaya. Triggered by the discharged revolver of the confused, freshly minted communist Yepikhodov, who wonders in what direction he is going now while the ghosts of *The Cherry Orchard* are beckoning from behind the dead trees, Comrade Boris's death exposes the dead end of communism as a political and ideological project that became obsolete and expired in the twilight of the Soviet bloc.

Unlike Chekhov's play that digs for steady incisions into the pains of the spirit, Ularu's *A Sequel* pokes into the ills of the Stalinist regime and of Marxist-Leninist ideology, and is at its most potent and beautiful when it becomes a ghost story—when the departed, not just Grisha and Firs, but also Trofimov and Comrade Boris return to quiz or confront the living. That makes an ideal twist for *A Sequel*, a play both besotted with and dismissive of the communist past. The specters suggest going fleetingly in the world of the dead as the time of Central and Eastern Europe is now ripe for another visit.

In *A Sequel*, Ularu's dramatic achievement derives from his ability to conform to the original text without violating the Russian classic, to embed his own dramatic imagery into the fabric of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* while writing a different play and maintaining a remarkable mastery of style, empowered and distinguished through its own originality. Further, *A Sequel's* characters are conceived with impeccable theatrical consistency in the sense that without cannibalizing their famous models they are rooted in a hostile political regime that generates a different sentiment than the comically pathetic mode of Chekhov's anguished protagonists. Finally, the

⁶⁹ Ularu, *Orchard*, 83–84.

dynamic rhythm and flow of the dramatic conflict over private ownership and the violent death of all characters in *A Sequel* meant to suggest the scale of the atrocities committed in the name of communism by a demented Bolshevism born in the aftermath of Chekhov's play, allow Ularu to join the long line of politically engaged dramatists of Central and Eastern Europe.

By staging an incipient history of communism as a dramatic *déjà vu*, closely tuned in to actual political and social events, *A Sequel* is Ularu's perfect appropriation of a postmodern theatrical space that plays an active role in refreshing the collective memory about communism, or about what Matéi Vişniec, another Romanian-born playwright and exile, calls "horror disguised as humanism."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Matéi Vişniec, *Procesul comunismului prin teatru* [The trial of communism through theatre], (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012).

II.

Adapting Molière and Jules Verne to Soviet Censorship: The Alchemical Politics of Bulgakov's *A Cabal of Hypocrites* and *The Crimson Island*

Considered by many the best playwright of the Soviet period,⁷¹ Mikhail Bulgakov was a man of the theater whose work as a playwright, writer, and theater director illustrates not only the devastating impact of Stalinist censorship and utter vulnerability of the artist, but also the extent at which theater functioned as a window through which one could see the revolutionary vigilance imposed on culture under the cult of Stalin. During this period, roughly identified as 1929–39,⁷² Bulgakov wrote most of his plays and conducted his professional activity as director of the Moscow Art Theatre under continued attacks from the press, which was the most important means of control and of inculcating values through daily interventions, and from the Central Repertory Committee that asserted Stalinist prerogatives in the hypervigilance imposed on theatrical productions. In league with these cultural commissars, the press gave terrible reviews to Bulgakov's plays that were ultimately banned from the stage after 1929, with the notable exception of a single play. *A Cabal of Hypocrites*, completed in 1929 and rehearsed in the early 1930s was cut from the repertory after seven performances as a direct result of an unfavorable review, despite its success at the box office.

Two of the plays written during this most critical period of Bulgakov's life are of particular significance in revealing the role of theatrical adaptations as a covert outlet for political protest and for documenting Bulgakov's personal suffering and victimization: *The Crimson Island* (1927), a play modeled on Jules Verne's work in a brave attempt to satirize the Soviet

⁷¹ See Ellendea Proffer, ed., *The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), xi.

⁷² James Heizer, "The Cult of Stalin, 1929–1939" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, Lexington, 1977).

theater world, and *A Cabal of Hypocrites* which portrays the famous playwright Molière as a hopeless victim crushed by a despotic king and by the hypocritical and abusive church representatives that the French master had exposed in his comedy *Tartuffe*. Before discussing in further detail these plays, however, it is important to take a look at Bulgakov's engagement with the theater world and his relationship with Stalin.

Bulgakov's convoluted relationship with the Moscow theater world began in April 1925, the year he received a note from Boris Vershilov, a director at the Moscow Art Theater, with an invitation to discuss adapting for the stage the novel *The White Guard*, which had begun to appear in the journal *Rossiia* in December 1924. In the new adaptation Bulgakov was compelled by the theater administration to make drastic alterations, such as cutting the play down to three acts, transforming the ending so that the youngest Turbin brother, Nikolka, Bulgakov's actual brother who had in real life fought on the tsar's side, would be joining the Bolshevik ranks, and closing the play with the swelling song of "The Internationale," the communist anthem of workers worldwide. In this censorship-vetted version, *The White Guard* became *The Days of the Turbins*, a title that avoided the potentially explosive word "white" altogether.

In this context, Bulgakov, a Kiev native who was obsessed with his failures in Moscow, and especially with the exclusion of his plays from the theater repertoires, felt belittled and persecuted. Moreover, he felt that the changes forced on his plays were a clear reflection of the Bolsheviks' disregard for culture and authorial dignity. According to Solomon Volkov, the largest section of Bulgakov's correspondence, which includes letters and documents from the period covering 1924–40, contains relevant information about the obstructions that were raised against Bulgakov's work and the author himself. As Volkov writes, during a search carried out on May 7, 1926 by the State Political Police (GPU) in connection with a case against Isay Lezhnev, the editor of *Rossiia*, the journal that had just finished publishing two-thirds of the novel *The White Guard*, Bulgakov's short story *Heart of a Dog* and three *Journal* notebooks were seized. Bulgakov was interrogated by the State Political Police representatives on September 22, 1926. The minutes of this interrogation recorded several of Bulgakov's statements: he admitted that he manifested a "satirical attitude" toward contemporary Soviet life; that, during the Civil War he had sympathized with the Whites

(his novel *The White Guard* made famous by its stage adaptation that same year as *The Days of the Turbins* did not help) and had always had a hostile attitude towards Soviet Russia; and that *Heart of a Dog* was a hostile text. Moreover, he stated that he was allergic to proletarian and rural topics and that his interest lay exclusively with the intelligentsia.⁷³

A few years later, the letter Bulgakov addressed to Stalin in July 1929 includes detailed information about the persecutions he had endured. He painted a self-portrait of his being “poisoned” by the authorities and demanded that he should be expelled from the USSR. The letter of September 3, 1929, addressed to the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, was another desperate ultimatum resumed in yet another letter, to Maxim Gorky, also dated September 3, in which Bulgakov enhanced the details: “Everything’s been banned, and I am ruined, persecuted, and completely alone. Why keep a writer in a country where his works cannot exist? I ask for a humane resolution—that they should let me go.”⁷⁴ He then demanded that the Soviet Russian Writers Union should exclude him. On January 16, 1930, he wrote anxiously to his brother Nikolai, who had settled in France after the defeat of the Whites in the Civil War: “I am condemned to silence and, quite possibly, to complete starvation ... I must drown with courage.”⁷⁵ He intended to embark on a dignified social persona. On February 21, 1930, he acknowledged his social and political stigma with even greater accuracy: “I constitute a complex (as I imagine) piece of apparatus, the production of which is simply not needed in the USSR.”⁷⁶

This statement sounds almost identical to another anguished cry heard in the final scene of Mayakovsky’s *The Bathhouse*, a play that had been compared by the Soviet critic B. Milyavsky to Bulgakov’s *The Crimson Island*. In a 1963 critical essay on the two works published in *Satirik i vremia*, Milyavsky maintains that both plays are about Soviet censorship, with the notable difference that “Mayakovsky lashes out against ‘bureaucratic’

⁷³ Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008), 97.

⁷⁴ J.A.E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don’t Burn: Mikhail Bulgakov, A Life in Letters and Diaries* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 15. All the details about Bulgakov’s correspondence are from this book. Similarly, all quotations from Bulgakov’s letters are from this edition.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

management of art, but in Bulgakov's play the very idea of state and Party management of theatrical life is ridiculed, scorned."⁷⁷

On March 28, 1930, Bulgakov wrote his famous letter to the Central Executive Committee of the USSR government, which resulted in Stalin's telephoning Bulgakov to ask whether the latter wanted to leave the country. The writer told the dictator that he could not live outside Russia. After this phone call, Bulgakov became obsessed with the image of Stalin, seen both as Savior and, at the same time, as an absolute tyrant.⁷⁸ Bulgakov's unsettling worship and criticism of Stalin had a famous precedent in the case of Molière, another celebrated playwright whose flattery of King Louis XIV ensured protection from the ferocious censorship of the Compagnie du Saint Sacrement that had orchestrated the banning of the play *Tartuffe* only to have the ban lifted after the King's intervention allowing Molière to stage the play.

Although Bulgakov's letter to Stalin written in 1930 resulted in getting a job in the theater, an affiliation that granted him deliverance from financial misery, Bulgakov was not allowed to publish or stage his plays after 1929. As the obstructions against him continued, Bulgakov wrote another letter to Stalin in 1931, in which he drew a powerful self-portrait:

In the broad field of Russian literature in the USSR, I have been the one and only lone wolf. I was advised to dye my fur. An absurd piece of advice. Whether a wolf dyes his fur or has it clipped, he will still look nothing like a poodle.

I have been treated like a wolf. For several years I have been pursued according to all the rules of wolf-baiting in a fenced-in yard.

I feel no anger, but I am very weary, and at the end of 1929 I collapsed. After all, even a beast can become weary.

At that point the beast has declared that he is no longer a wolf, nor a writer. That he was renouncing his profession. That he was falling silent. And that, to be frank, was pusillanimous.

⁷⁷ Quoted in "Introduction" to *The Crimson Island* in Proffer, *The Early Plays*, 245.

⁷⁸ In 1934 Bulgakov wrote to Stalin again to ask for his help so that he could leave on a trip abroad, which could help alleviate his chronic nervous fatigue and, at the same time, provide him with the opportunity to write a book. In 1938 he wrote to Stalin for the last time to intervene in favor of N. Erdman, the playwright, who had been deported for three years.

There is no such thing as a writer who falls silent. If he falls silent, it means he was never a true writer. For if a true writer were to fall silent, then he would perish.⁷⁹

Bulgakov's "lone-wolf" status, which allowed him to hold on to the theater world while refusing to bow completely to the impositions of the Soviet regime and censorship, as well as his refusal to be silenced, may explain his strong attraction to Molière and the depiction of the French playwright as another victim of similar circumstances—censorship and whimsical rule of a tyrant—in the play *A Cabal of Hypocrites*.

Bulgakov's Molière projects spanned 1932 through 1935, a time period that followed the ban on his own plays on Moscow's stages. Such projects indicate that the French master was Bulgakov's hero and role model for a politically engaged and creatively vivacious playwright, and included a prose biography of Molière, the play about Molière also known as *A Cabal of Hypocrites*, and a translation of the play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, commissioned by the Zavadsky Theatre Studio. Aptly called Molièriana by Bulgakov,⁸⁰ the potpourri of Molièrian themes and characters largely based on *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* but also incorporating some of Bulgakov's own reflections on the way in which theater succeeds in communicating its audiences the politically forbidden, indicate the huge significance of Molière's works for Bulgakov.

Although this extraordinary piece was rejected by the Zavadsky Theatre, presumably because it strayed too much from the original commission, Bulgakov pressed on with his prose biography of Molière and delivered it to the publishers, who promptly rejected it claiming that they had in mind more conventional biographies and not the type of ingenious and witty text Bulgakov has created. More to the point, the biographical text also contained some fairly transparent hints about the Soviet reality, which were uncomfortably suggestive of issues in the Soviet Union and could not be accepted by the stringent Stalinist censorship.

Despite the rejection of Bulgakov's adaptation of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and of the prose biography of Molière, the saga continued with

⁷⁹ Curtis, *Manuscripts*, 126.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

A Cabal of Hypocrites. The spring of 1935 brought about the culmination of the Molière years as *A Cabal of Hypocrites*, which had been in half-hearted rehearsals for some four years, entered production under the direction of the great Stanislavsky. After heated arguments with Stanislavsky, who was trying to pressure Bulgakov into accepting the director's own views in the matter of Molière's characterization, the same way the director had imposed changes in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* in Lopakhin's character portrayal, Stanislavsky withdrew from the project and *A Cabal of Hypocrites* went on under the direction of Nikolay Gorchakov.

Although the play was artistically a triumph and had at least twenty curtain calls each time it was performed in unofficial premieres, the reviews were unanimously hostile. The March 11, 1936 issue of *Soviet Art* describes *A Cabal of Hypocrites* as "a squalid and mendacious play" and an article of June 12 in the magazine *Theatre and Drama* presents it as a "low-grade falsification."⁸¹ Finally, a critical article in the March 9, 1936 issue of *Pravda* venomously titled "External Glitter and False Content," led to the cancellation of all further performances of *A Cabal of Hypocrites*.

Bulgakov's tribulations were close to Molière's own experiences with censorship. His well-known and fiercely contested *Tartuffe* or *The Impostor*, another play about a *bourgeois gentilhomme*, scandalized ecclesiastical authorities since the first production and was banned for years. After many trials and hardships that Molière underwent in dealing with church censors, he had to rework the play three times over the course of a five-year period before *Tartuffe* could finally be staged.

Bulgakov must have been fascinated with the manner in which Molière, while appearing to flatter King Louis XIV and delighting his audiences with facile comedies, criticized in *Tartuffe* a corrupt monarchy and the lying, the political Jesuitry and the hypocrisy of the Christian revival of the time. I offer a detailed analysis of *Tartuffe* in the next chapter, but here I want to address what may have appeared to Bulgakov in his own play *A Cabal of Hypocrites* to be Molière's personal suffering after the banning of *Tartuffe* and, to a certain degree, what may have been Bulgakov's complicit understanding of Molière's flattery of the king, as a reflection of Bulgakov's own unsettling worship of Stalin.

⁸¹ Curtis, *Manuscripts*, 233–35.

A Cabal of Hypocrites, which premiered under the title *Molière* at the Moscow Art Theatre on February 15, 1936, contains actual events of Molière's life that are given a completely different coloration in the play. Because Bulgakov knew the facts of Molière's life, and because he wrote a bibliography based on those facts, one must conclude that he did not intend to write a historically accurate biographical play about Molière. Moreover, in his play Bulgakov uses certain words from Molière's *Le malade imaginaire* which he interspaces in his *Cabal of Hypocrites*, to convey through veiled allusions his own suffering at the hands of Stalin and resulting from the inquisitorial denunciations of his plays by the Soviet cabal of critics. All this is not to say that Bulgakov's play is not accurate in other respects, such as the atmosphere of France under Louis XIV and the character of Louis, the Cabal itself identifiable in its historical time as the Compagnie du Saint Sacrament. Also documentable are Molière's wife Armande, his *registre* La Grange, and even the character of Molière as an impulsive and flamboyant person, a hypochondriac who had turned flattering Louis XIV into a real art and benefitted thoroughly from the monarch's protection.

But the historical Molière suffered no persecution when compare to Bulgakov's pitiful playwright in *A Cabal of Hypocrites*, whose plight is a powerful staging of the tormented and persecuted artist who has to bend to the demands of a despot in order to have his work played, that is to say in order to exist. Speaking from what was Bulgakov's own experience, his Molière has to suffer humiliating self-abasement in the service of the king ("All of my life licked his spurs, and I kept thinking just one thing: don't crush me. And now he's crushed me anyway. The tyrant."), only to be still crushed by royal decree and as a result of the brutal church censorship implemented by the Cabal of the Holy Writ's sinister members, Brother Force, Brother Fidelity, and Father Barthelémy, under the leadership of the Marquis de Charron, archbishop of Paris—all fictional characters devised, much like Molière's death, to suit Bulgakov's political agenda.⁸²

⁸² Among the inaccuracies: Bulgakov changed dates in his play so that the ban of *Tartuffe* occurs near the time of Molière's death, deliberately used the name of Charron for the historical Archbishop Perefex who had been Louis XIV's tutor, and presented the death of Molière to occur on stage during the final performance of *Le malade imaginaire*. For an accurate account of Molière's death, as quoted from *Registre of La Grange*, see Henry Trollope, *The Life of Molière* (1905).

Nineteen thirty-six, the year *A Cabal of Hypocrites* was briefly staged, was crucial for the much acclaimed new Stalinist constitution, which proclaimed the Soviet Union as the most democratic country in the world. But Stalin was to give a stunning turn of events to the general euphoria. Addressing his report to a Central Committee plenum in early March 1937, Stalin criticized the lighthearted ways of the Soviet society, pointing out that this “dizzy with success” type of exuberance was counter to the epic imperative necessary in every moment to guard the unprecedented triumphs of the communist ideal. He called for increased vigilance and the undertaking of “desperate means” to protect the achievements of the Soviet society against counterrevolutionary apostates. Such directives that in the end unleashed the Great Terror of 1937–39 had in fact begun earlier in the complicated process of building the Stalinist state, with the indefatigable and frenetic denunciations, sometimes as a result of verifications, of those who were perceived as disloyal or threatening to the purity of Soviet ideals.

Incited by petty jealousies and infighting among party activists operating in all sectors of society, denunciations were also common in the theater world whose artists lived, much like Bulgakov’s Molière, in constant fear. Shrewdly joining the rousing ovations of voices shouting “Long live Comrade Stalin,” Bulgakov has Molière and his entourage in *A Cabal of Hypocrites* shouting on stage, with an equal sense of mission, “Long live the King” as Molière recites verses of worship to the “Most Radiant Sovereign,” “The Sun of France,” “Louis the Great French King” only to have the Cabal’s brothers’ denunciations against him prevail with the King in the end. Accused of being “a Satan” and “an atheist-comedian who has sneered at religion and at its servants,” Molière is denounced by an orphan boy, Zachary Moirron, whom he has taken into his troupe. In a scene that must have looked and sounded familiar to Bulgakov’s audience, Moirron is reluctantly taken blindfolded to “a secret session of the Cabal of the Holy Writ” where Father Fidelity asks him “to repeat your denunciation in the presence of these honorable brethren.”⁸³

When the King summons “the director of the Theatre Palais Royal, Monsieur de Molière,” the spectator can easily identify in the French playwright appointed through royal patronage a veiled stand-in for Bulgakov,

⁸³ Ibid., 365–66, 381, 194, 391.

who was named director of the Moscow Art Theatre after Stalin's intervention. When the king questions Molière about the accusations, the insignificant character named only the Honest Cobbler (who aptly suggests the equally powerless proletarian class) asks, "Great Monarch, is it true that no kingdom can exist without the acts of informers?" The king's response, "Keep quiet, jester, fix the shoe. Don't you like informers?,"⁸⁴ highlights Bulgakov's transparent allusion to Stalinist tactics and the tenets of proletarian culture which simply meant the proletariat's ideological domination by the Party hegemony.

After advising Molière's denouncer Moirron to forget about acting and join the secret police in the King's service, the latter effortlessly assumes the role of a despotic Stalin. In this imagined capacity, the king speaks to Molière by issuing dreaded proclamations: "I forbid you to play *Tartuffe* ... I am allowing your light comedies to be played at the Palais Royal, but nothing else ... And from this day you should beware of reminding me of your existence. I am depriving you of the King's patronage."⁸⁵

As *A Cabal of Hypocrites* ends with Molière's death on stage after a categorical refusal to escape sure arrest by fleeing in a carriage arranged for him by his troupe, "ticketless musketeers" break into the theater and kill the guard, spreading panic in the audience in clear violation of the cultural space. Against the disquieting background of the empty theater, La Grange records in his register next to the largest of black crosses what might have been Bulgakov's own eulogy:

February seventeenth. It was the fourth performance of the play *Le Malade imaginaire* by Monsieur de Molière. At ten o'clock in the evening Monsieur de Molière, playing the role of Argan, fell down on the stage and was taken immediately, without confession, by unmerciful death.' (*Pause.*) ... What was the cause of this? What was it? How can I write it down? ... The cause was the disfavor of the King and the black Cabal! ... And thus I shall record it! (*He writes.*)⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid., 399.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 401.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 418.

Bulgakov's disheartened attitude in *A Cabal of Hypocrites* may be explained by the fate of his prior stage production, *The Crimson Island*, which was suspended immediately after its premiere. Drawing his inspiration from another French master, Jules Verne, Bulgakov remedially contrasts the dark (self-)mythologizing process of the oppressive Soviet apparatus (which has programmatically cultivated the citizen's fear of the NKVD, GPU, and KGB) with a mythology of characters beloved by all those who, growing up in Eastern Europe, were enchanted by Jules Verne's tales of fantastic adventures written over a forty-two year period, from 1863 to 1905. Like Bulgakov, whose novel *The White Guard* became a successful play, Verne also had theatrical productions adapted from his novels: *Le Tour de monde en 80 jours* [*Around the World in 80 Days*] staged in 1874 (and eventually chalking up over fifty years of performances), *Le Docteur Ox* [*Doctor Ox*] in 1877, *Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant* [*In Search of the Castaways: Captain Grant's Children*] in 1878, *Michel Stragoff* in 1880, and *Voyage à travers l'impossible* [*Journey Through the Impossible*] in 1882. For both Bulgakov and Verne, the theater was a major contributor to enhancing their reputation as highly successful popular authors.

Although it was successful with the audiences at its premiere on December 11, 1928, *The Crimson Island* was sharply criticized by the press. As Bulgakov notes in his 1930 letter to Stalin, "All the critics in the USSR without exception greeted this play by declaring that it was 'untalented, toothless and quite wretched,' and that it represented 'a lampoon on the Revolution.'"⁸⁷ It is entirely possible that the theater critics were also encouraged in their unusual unanimity of negative reviews by the fact that Stalin did not like *The Crimson Island*. As the highest cultural arbiter of the country, and a regular patron of the theaters and their performances, which could not be criticized except on his own orders, Stalin may have seen in *The Crimson Island* what the German press in a 1929 issue of *The Young Guard* detected to be "the first call for freedom of press in the USSR"—a remark that Bulgakov noted in this 1930 letter to the dictator.⁸⁸ The play, which Stalin called a "hack-work" in a letter to the playwright Bill Belotserkovsky,⁸⁹ also served

⁸⁷ Curtis, *Manuscripts*, 105.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.

as the final piece of evidence in the trial by press of Bulgakov: a year after its premiere, in 1929, all of his plays were taken out of production.

With their linear structure, rudimentary character psychology, and classic realist style, Verne's novels reflect, as Roland Barthes writes in *Mythologies* (1975),⁹⁰ the social and cultural order in which they were produced. More recent studies have emphasized the poetic quality of Verne's descriptions, thus making him more of an *écrivain* than an *écrivain*, to adopt Barthes's own dichotomy, in the sense that his writing is self-consciously wrestling with language itself, rather than being the means for representation. Such critics tend to approach Verne's work from a different angle than those emphasizing the role of science and technology and to favor an analysis of the social, cultural, and ideological implications of his work. For example, Pierre Macherey devotes a large part of his Althusserian Marxist seminal book, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*⁹¹ (*A Theory of Literary Production*), to an analysis of the immensely complex ideological resonances of the Vernian text. Focusing his theory on the manner in which a literary text connects with ideology, Macherey's deconstructive critical strategy concentrates on how the conditions of a text's production are inscribed in the text itself. Macherey is critical of Barthes's cavalier dismissal of Verne, arguing instead that Verne provides a more fractured view of the dominant ideology of his society at the crucial historical moment of the expansion of France's colonial empire, while "inconsciously [*sic*],"⁹² articulating its contradictions.

Along the same lines, Andrew Martin remarks, "if Verne's oeuvre is in part a study of the growth of empire, it is also a diagnosis of its growing pains, of the upsets and disturbances to which the body politic is susceptible, and the strains that threaten to undermine its coherence."⁹³ In projecting an alternative universe, contemporary critics seem to agree that Verne's work constructs an imaginary world, what Patrick Grainville has neatly

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, Collections 'Points' 1975), 80–82.

⁹¹ Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* [*A theory of literary production*] (Paris: Maspero, 1966).

⁹² Macherey, *Pour une théorie*, 220.

⁹³ Andrew Martin, *The Mask of the Prophet: The Extraordinary Fictions of Jules Verne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 79.

called a “Univerne,”⁹⁴ which coexists but does not coincide with the real, contemporary world. What gives this universe its coherence are the characteristic motifs, the panoply of mazes, volcanoes, grottos, islands, and the like, which are the products of what Guy Bachelard calls *imagination matérielle* and which are complemented by the equally important combinatorial structures applied to such motifs, the complex but coherent patterns of symmetry and inversion that Michel Serres rightly valorizes as *l’imagination formelle*.⁹⁵ It is the combination of the two types of imagination that creates meaning, recommending Verne as a mythologist of what constitutes, in Buton’s term, “une mythologie singulièrement structurée”⁹⁶—a mythology that reworks and synthesizes fiction and the realities of one’s own age.

Appropriating and adopting Verne’s combination in which the literary text connects with ideology, Bulgakov creates in *The Crimson Island* the utopian universe of an exotic floating island, complete with a volcano, a vision remote from the grim reality of the Soviet Union and accessible through the quasi-mythical intercession of the “univerne” rendered within a theatrical production. Thus, if the character of Verne’s journeys and extraordinary travels is to lie through a startling and unique displacement of the real world of toil, suffering, and darkness in order to create a liberal-capitalist utopia, Bulgakov’s charming plot’s function in *Crimson Island* is precisely that of fighting against the sinister lies instituted by Stalin’s totalitarian society through a serene and cleansing mythology meant to counter the dark political background of the Soviet Union. On an immediate level, the exotic island also offers an escape from the daily indignities of Bulgakov’s life in the communal apartment building on Sadovaya Street, and the play registers a satirical protest against the ludicrously arbitrary decisions of the Soviet censors with whom the dramatist was all too familiar.

In the elaborate structure of *The Crimson Island*, whose main subject is to mock the crude censorship of Stalinist Russia where an inadequate

⁹⁴ Quoted by David Meakin in “Future Past: Myth, Inversion and Regression in Verne’s Underground Utopia,” in *Jules Verne: Narratives of Modernity*, ed. Edmund J. Smyth (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 94.

⁹⁵ Michel Serres, “Un Voyage au bout de la nuit: Jules Verne, Les Indes Noires [Journey into the night: Jules Verne, The Black Indies],” *Critiques*, 262 (1969): 302.

⁹⁶ Michel Butor, “Le point suprême et l’âge d’or à travers quelques romans de Jules Verne,” *Répertoire*, 1 (1960): 132.

individual was assigned to ban or permit the staging of plays on the basis on their political message, Bulgakov frames, much like Verne in his writings, a pure fantasy within a thoroughly contemporary setting. Like Verne's *De la terre à la lune* [*From Earth to the Moon*], which features two dramatically opposed settings, Bulgakov's *The Crimson Island* is consolidated by the dual structure of the play's crosshatched plot and locations. This includes, on the one hand, the story of a Moscow theater whose director, Gennadi Panfilovich, has to stage a play by a well-respected writer, Vasily Arturovich Dymogatsky, in a manner that has to be approved by the communist censorship, personified by Savva Lukich; and on the other, the play itself, which presents the natives of an imaginary island visited by a group of French and British colonialists taken from Jules Verne's novel *In Search of the Castaways* (Professor Paganel, Passpartout, and Lord and Lady Glenarvan) at a time of political upheaval stirred by revolutionary natives, whose names (Ki-Kum, Farra-Teytey) are those of Maori chieftains in the same book by Jules Verne.

In *The Crimson Island* the threshold to the native island, which is the setting of the dramatist Domogatsky's play within the play,⁹⁷ is marked by the "making strange" effect of oxymoron of the type Verne achieves in his book *Les Indes noires* [*The Child of the Caverns*]. As its title suggests, Dymogatsky's play features an island inhabited by red natives who live under the rule of white Arabs (an adaptation in English of the Russian word *arap*, which means a "black servant or slave," as in Pushkin's *The Blackmoor of Peter the Great*—*Arap Petra Velikogo*, and could be translated literally as "white blackmoors" or "white slaves," but makes more sense as white Arabs). Further, in the blunt, political adaptation of colors in "The Crimson Island," the red-skinned island natives are the Reds and the white Arabs who rule over the island are the Whites of pre-Civil War Russia.

The visiting ship bringing Lord Glenarvan and his entourage to the island suggests the Western world, greedy to colonize the new territory and appropriate its vast, untapped natural resources of superb pearls, a variant of alchemical concentration that sometimes forms in the shell of an oyster, not unlike diamonds, which are a variant of alchemical carbon in *The Child of the Caverns*. Challenging the paternalistic attitude of the island's ruler

⁹⁷ Because both plays have the same title, from here on I refer to Dymogatsky's play within the play as "The Crimson Island" in quotation marks, and to Bulgakov's in italics, *The Crimson Island*.

Sizi-Buzi the Second, who dispenses of the island treasures, the revolutionaries Ki-Kum and Farra-Teytey are brought in chains from their dungeon cell to be executed. In the farcical setting of Dymogatsky's play, the two are transparent stand-ins for Lenin and Trotsky, respectively, and a third man brought with them is the ever scheming snitch and turncoat Kiri-Kuki. The latter is another name of Maori chieftain from Verne's book, a caricature of Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky, a key figure of the Bolshevik Revolution, endowed with an enviable propensity for masterminding self-serving political intrigues and escaping near-death situations.

Far from being a playful pass at light drama, Dymogatsky's funny and stirring play is a valiant act of protest against the sinister farce of the Bolshevik Revolution, disguised as a political cartoon with flashy tropes and coded events. But beyond this immediate scenario, *The Crimson Island* is an adaptation of the nightmarish Soviet Union where dramatists have no choice but to submit to the state's official censorship and to resign himself to accusations from official censors of being counterrevolutionary. The ultimate purpose of Bulgakov's play is to give the audience the ultimate baring of the device, show exactly how and why a play is censored, as the theater director urges the changes in Dymogatsky's play that accommodate not only the demands of the censor, but also modify the playwright's text as a preemptive move to shield the theatrical production against any possible accusation of promoting a counterrevolutionary plot.

Bulgakov's play opens with the theater director Gennadi Panfilovich waiting in his office for the playwright Dymogatsky, who is already three days late in delivering the "The Crimson Island." The director's impatience with Dymogatsky is contingent upon the approval for the production, which is to be decided by Savva Lukich, a vigilant art commissary of the Party. Consecrated in the image of the omnipotent and omniscient punitive god of the collective mentality of dark communist mythology, Savva Lukich must make sure that the play does not contain any *smenovekhovskie* (counterrevolutionary elements) before he approves its production, but he is also in a terrible hurry to see the play before leaving the following morning for a vacation in Crimea, a favored holiday location of Stalin and all the top communist leaders.

From the start, when Dymogatsky tries to explain that the play is an allegory and must be understood subtly, Gennadi Panfilovich's protestation—

“allegories are so thick on the inside with Menshevism that it could be cut with a knife”⁹⁸—introduces the director as a symbolic synthesis of all USSR servile and brainwashed artists. Panfilovich’s insistence on the ideological accuracy of the play (“It’s a play that is ideological to the marrow of its bones,”⁹⁹ he tells the censor Savva Lukich in reference to *The Crimson Island*), and his eagerness to make corrections based on the censor’s objections, are mimetically adapted to conform to and promote the Stalinist agenda and the fake culture (*khaltura*) of the USSR. His judgment calls and commentaries recommend him not only as a conduit for bad or fake art, someone whose artistic perceptions are reduced to simple (good or bad) politically correct categorizing, but primarily as a twisted director, a member of the Soviet nomenclature completely perverted by communism and acting more like a Party activist or a would-be people’s commissary concerned with faithful adherence to Stalinist ideology, not theatrical excellence.

Although Bulgakov’s play merely suggests the totalitarian atmosphere, there are sufficient points of reference in Dymogatsky’s “The Crimson Island” to identify the natives’ island as a parody of the Soviet Union and of its leaders behind hilarious theatrical gags and clever Vernian devices. As a timeless island paradise, the natives’ island is the socialized version of an alchemical dream, with all its utopian regression, its comical inversions, and the intertextuality of all literature, from Rousseau’s nostalgic island in the fifth *Rêverie* to Verne’s variations of the Coal-City in *The Child of the Caverns*. Following the symbolic pattern of alchemy, the island provides an escape from normal time and space, enjoys an offbeat picturesque landscape of its own (palm trees, a volcano, and an abundance of natural resources), and is populated by inhabitants who never seem at work, only at leisure.

Beyond the funny and scintillating double plot of “The Crimson Island,” each character broadcasts a sense of his own uniqueness and coded identity used as a fertile territory for parody and political satire. For example, the imprisoned revolutionaries, Ki-Kum (Lenin) and Farra-Teytey (Trotsky), are brought in chains to Tsar Sizi-Buzi the Second, the island’s legitimate sovereign and humorous counterpart to Tsar Nicholas II, and charged with “cooking-up” a revolt. Defiant, Farra-Teytey challenges Sizi-Buzi, under

⁹⁸ Proffer, *The Early Plays*, 256.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

whose rule “Thousands of natives, a crushed, obedient people crawls along the burning earth, owing maize, finding pearls for you, and gathering turtle-eggs. They work from the rise to the setting of the sun god.”¹⁰⁰ As a great defender of the island’s natives, Farra-Teytey speaks in ideologically impeccable rhetoric, of the type his real-life model Trotsky used in formulating such Soviet documents as the Politburo’s 1925 resolution, “On the Party’s Policy in the Sphere of Literature,” which had to have had a great impact on Bulgakov.

Outwitting Farra-Teytey, the white Arab Kiri-Kuki, who had been in dungeon with the two native revolutionaries to better spy on them and “so that the natives wouldn’t guess about his treachery,”¹⁰¹ uses words that fly and splatter around like paintballs, spilling the funny mess of Bolshevik class struggle, Stalinist tactics, and communist ideology on everyone. After the death of Sizi-Buzi in the eruption of the island’s volcano, which is the humorous equivalent of Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* where the storm led the explorers being expelled from the Earth’s womb via a volcano in a symbolic reenactment of the trauma of birth, in “The Crimson Island” the volcano is richly valorized as a *regresus ad uterum* followed by a rebirth in a new world. With the death of Sizi-Buzi in the eruption, Kiri-Kuki seizes the political opportunity to speak in coded indictments about the dead ruler as “a tyrant who tortured his people.” Positioning himself to become the island’s supreme ruler, Kiri-Kuki presents himself as “an Arab by birth, but a native in spirit,” and promises that “There will be no more oppression on this island, there will be no stinging lashes from the Arab overseers, there will be no slavery. You are the masters of your won island now, you are the rulers yourselves! Oh, natives!”¹⁰² Cheered by the natives, who appear first separately and then in crowds carrying red flags, and with the reluctant support of the white Arabs led by the bullish General Likki-Tikki, Kiri-Kuki proclaims himself Kiri-Kuki the First. His first decree proclaims the renaming of “our dear island, which in the time of Sizi-Buzi bore the name of Native Island,” to Crimson Island.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 269.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 266.

¹⁰² Ibid., 285.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 287.

Unlike Jules Verne, in whose original work Lord Glenarvan was pious and noble and Paganel a benign and generous scientist, Bulgakov makes one a caricature colonial and the other a silly French man engaged in a preposterous bargaining with Sizi-Buzi over the pearls, which are the island's greatest natural treasure. Providing a different kind of comic relief than the Vernian version of Anglo-French colonial rivalries, Dymogatsky's Lord Glenarvan and Paganel enact a ludic inversion, in which Lord Glenarvan constantly has the upper hand over the French scientist. As they reach what appears to be an uninhabited island, Paganel has to settle for Lady Glenarvan's claim that she was the first to notice it and thus accept Lord Glenarvan's lead:

PAGANEL: I swear by the *Champs-Élysées*, I was the first to notice it.

LADY: *Excuse, Monsieur Paganel*, I was the first to shout "uninhabited."

LORD: The Lady is correct. Captain, give me the flag. (*He jams the English flag into the ground.*) Yes, an English island!

PAGANEL: *Passepartout!* The flag! (*He jams the French flag into the ground.*) *Oui*, a French island.

LORD: How is this act to be understood, sir?

PAGANEL: Understand it as you wish, *monsieur*.

LORD: You are a guest on my yacht, sir, and I do not understand you. I cannot permit the island to sit around waiting for just any vagabond to claim it.¹⁰⁴

After Sizi-Buzi's death and Kiri-Kuki's first proclamations, the idea of revolutionary struggle and sacrifice is humorously reduced once again to a rather lighthearted squabble over pearls between Kiri-Kuki and the natives and brought to a climax by the resurfacing of Ki-Kum and Farra-Teytey. Retrieved from the ocean waters by the pearl fishermen, the two unmask Kiki-Kuri as "a provocateur, a scoundrel and an upstart"¹⁰⁵ and incite the natives to take control under Ki-Kum's orders, "Brother natives! To arms! To arms! Arm yourselves with bows and spears! Those that have none with stones!"¹⁰⁶ Continuing the ludic expression of ideology, Dymogatsky's play

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 272.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 295.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 296.

features the Westerners' silly invasion spearheaded by the now outcast Kiri-Kuki in Act IV as another humorous enactment of the Bolshevik Revolution, prompted by Gennadi Panfilovich's decision to bring back the army of white Arabs carrying red flags and pledging their allegiance to the natives in order to secure Savva Lukich's permission for the staging of Dymogatsky play.

To some extent, like *A Cabal of Hypocrites* in which Bulgakov decries his fate while putatively writing about the tribulations of Molière, *The Crimson Island* can be read as a fictionalized autobiography, partially equating the playwright Dymogatsky with Bulgakov, as a dramatist stung by the negative critical reception of his plays and who expands the boundaries of dramatic representation by imitating Jules Verne's popular fiction while lampooning Soviet censorship. Modeling his play on Verne's vast corpus of novels, which are quintessentially a document about a changing world and the new possibilities of fiction—social, scientific, or political—at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, Dymogatsky uses as setting a remote tropical paradise, the very Vernian theme of an island, ruled by a benevolent Sizi-Buzi and his white Arabs, at a time of political change. Like Verne, who rarely kept his focus on France and never alluded to the terrible recent events of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, Dymogatsky is in need of escape from the Bolsheviks' takeover and wishes to entertain his audience about more far-flung places, no matter how subversive his tale.

Portrayed with facile sentimentality, his natives are slipped into a unique and separate category, geographically rather than sociologically situated, and their hardships are unrealistically eclipsed by their leisure in the tropical paradise, just as Verne's miners in Coal-City seem to be working within a paternalistic structure, in a utopian idealization of a mine. Cocooned against seasonal hardships, against weather and time, Verne's Coal-City is "*calme absolu, température douce, ni pluie ni vent. Rien n'y transpirait de la lutte des éléments du dehors.*"¹⁰⁷ As Michel Serres has noted,¹⁰⁸ the subterranean city is an inverted variant on Verne's privileged Vernian site, the island, which Dymogatsky also projects in his play as a reassuring image of a sealed contentment.

¹⁰⁷ Jules Verne, *Les Indes Noires* (Paris: Hachette, 1967), 137.

¹⁰⁸ Serres, "Un voyage," 291.

This is not to say that the simplistic coziness of these enclaves does not suffer its own interruptions of social harmony. Like Verne, who opens his readers' eyes to the political dimensions of exploration and colonization, taking a strong interest in the issue of nationalities, both in terms of particular national characteristics (the British and the Americans are subjected to especially lively characterization in his novels) and in terms of national uprisings and the oppression of minorities, Dymogatsky delineates the ruling white Arabs from the exploited red islanders, even though he parodies the British and the French in the characters of Lord and Lady Glenarvan and Paganel. Drawn with a typical Vernian touch, Dymogatsky's characters also hark back to a pseudo-medieval past, living in a castle on a feudal domain and exploiting sweet servants like Betsy, Lady Glenarvan's maid.

Jules Verne's deepening social and political vision as he grew older, and a shifting of the focus from the mechanics of travel to more somber political realities as he became more critical of the direction in which civilization was moving, an approach illustrated in *Propeller Island*, must have been particularly attractive to a writer like Dymogatsky, who embraces his new identity and starts calling himself Dymogatsky-Jules Verne in Bulgakov's play. Of Verne's evil scientists, who are always pursuing wealth or power or both in order to promote an evil regime or to destroy a good one, the case of Herr Schultze in *The Begum's Millions* (1879) must have been of particular interest to a Soviet playwright and may substantiate even further Bulgakov's attraction to Verne. After receiving an implausibly large inheritance, Herr Schultze creates the chillingly named city of Stahlstadt (Steel City), devoted to the pursuit of war and destruction. Given Bulgakov's sense of black humor, the Soviet reincarnation of Herr Schultze's Steel City as Stalin (the Man of Steel) or the creation in the Soviet Union of industrial cities like Magnitogorsk in the shadow of the Magnetic Mountain as a particularly attractive site for a steel plant,¹⁰⁹ might not be too much of a stretch in this context: it does, in fact, explain Dymogatsky's double-dipping in the Verne model to write "The Crimson Island" as a crude satire of the Soviets who practiced naming themselves after industrial objects (Molotov, Kamenev, etc.). This was after all a fertile territory for an alchemy of wishful thinking

¹⁰⁹ For more on this, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

in the euphoria of the workers' state and the Stalinist initiative of designing new cities while allowing for comical effect and easing the ideological tension in the double switch from the negative of the Bolsheviks' *noms de guerre* to the positive satirical puns of Dymogatsky's play.

With its reliance on Verne and on the archly melodramatic ghosts of his fiction, Dymogatsky's "Crimson Island" seems to thrive on such delicious ambiguities and pathological fantasies, which ultimately convey a funny allegory of the revolution. At the play's finale, far from condemning Dymogatsky as the author of trash, Bulgakov makes the reader/viewer feel sorry for him. The ending, which the censor Savva Lukich forces the theater to add is pure *khaltura*, but the rest of the play is not. And Dymogatsky is certainly not stupid or opportunistic enough to debase himself as a practitioner of *khaltura*.

Indeed, a critical focus on Bulgakov's own self-caricature in Dymogatsky as a pretentious dramatist or "literary lackey," subservient to the genteel imitation of classical tradition or reluctantly submitting to ridiculous constraints, ignores much of the tone of *The Crimson Island* and deals only partially with its conflict. Further, if the audience sympathizes with Dymogatsky, who seems to consent to having his "Crimson Island" turned into an ideological potboiler that satisfies the criteria of Soviet ideology, it has allowed itself to be gulled and to suspend critical discernment of Bulgakov's play.

Bulgakov's playful inclusion of his own theatrical endeavors in *The Crimson Island* and his dissociation from the playwright Dymogatsky become obvious when Gennadi Panfilovich states that he has rejected many plays, such as *The Days of the Turbins*, from production. The transparent target of Bulgakov's criticism and satire is the theater director, Gennadi Panfilovich, an embodiment of mediocre artistic taste. He comes on strongly as a boisterous, thoughtless sort of person whose arrogant interventions spell out the death of dramatic performance and the degradation of theater in the Soviet Union, even as Panfilovich seems to exist continually on a sort of emotional "high," an anxiety predicated on the director making sure that the theater does not get into trouble politically.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ One wonders to what extent Bulgakov is taking revenge here for the problems dramatists had with directors like Stanislavsky, who insisted on their own views directing a performance. The unflattering portrayal of Gennadi Panfilovich

Reducing Kiri-Kuki (Kerensky), Ki-Kum (Lenin), and Farra-Teytey (Trotsky) to vaudeville figures and the revolution to a laughable quarrel over pearls in the play within a play is a daring and dangerous thing for Bulgakov to do, but to bring to the stage the aberrant process of Soviet censorship and to reveal step by step Savva Lukich's comments and reactions (he is mostly unaware of what is going on) and the director Gennadi Panfilovich's servile and humiliating interventions is a most courageous act that turns Bulgakov's play into a political statement about the conformist practices of Soviet theater. From Gennadi Panfilovich's talking on the phone in the play's Prologue to the arrival of Savva Lukich in Act III, and later on in the Epilogue, from Savva Lukich's initial refusal to allow the production to his change of mind when his objections are satisfactorily met, the focus of Bulgakov's play is on the theater director's role in the staging of Dymogatsky's "The Crimson Island."

Unlike Lukich, who has to do his job and make sure that the theater does not cross over ideological lines, Gennadi Panfilovich is responsible for the possible changes and the overall sense of the theatrical production. When Savva Lukich expresses his objections to the ending of Dymogatsky's play, Gennadi Panfilovich intervenes in a comically submissive manner. Giving the censor credit for more subtlety of mind than Savva Lukich ever displays, Panfilovich hypocritically expresses his desire to be "enlightened":

My God! I kept thinking, I kept feeling that there was something lacking in the play! But what it was never occurred to me! Well, of course, it's the ending! Savva Lukich, you are pure gold for the theatre! I swear to you! I keep saying it on every street corner, we need men like you in the U.S.S.R.! Need them desperately! What's the trouble with the ending?¹¹¹

When Savva Lukich, incapable of ever reaching artistic heights, reminds the director of the need to include "the proletariat," "international revolution," and "solidarity" in the finale, the director reveals himself to be a

anticipates uncannily the problems Bulgakov was yet to encounter with Stanislavsky in the staging of *A Cabal of Hypocrites*. By regarding Bulgakov's play as a biographical drama, Stanislavsky was showing a literary insensitivity similar to the one he had for Chekhov while directing *The Cherry Orchard*.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 341.

pretentious buffoon, a literary clown, ridiculous at best, pathetic at worst. To Savva Lukich's perfidious comment that the author may not want to have an ending with an international revolution, a sneering hint to Bulgakov's real-life experiences of being coerced to drastically change his plays, Panfilovich responds with ideologically induced enthusiasm: "The author? Not wish it? I'd just like to see the man who doesn't desire an international revolution!" And then, in ways that Bulgakov may have intended as a parody of Mayakovsky's cult of collective Soviet praise materialized in his well-known dramatic efforts to engage the public in the stage performances, Panfilovich cries out "Perhaps someone doesn't want it? ... Raise your hand!"¹¹²

Showing great disdain for the author of the play, the director goes one better to accommodate Savva Lukich's imperative need to have an "ideologically sound" play: he turns Dymogatsky's finale into a circus, with the crew of Lord Glenarvan's ship "mutinied against the capitalists" and turned into "revolutionary English sailors," returning to the island, waving red flags, and singing "Long live the Crimson Island/ The finest of all land"¹¹³—a finale that prompts Gennadi Panfilovich's signature line, "the theatre is a temple," and makes possible the play's production with the proviso that Savva Lukich's consent is limited to this theater only. In keeping with ideological necessity, Savva Lukich bans "The Crimson Island" for all other cities of the Soviet Union, bringing to the public's awareness what can only be seen as a preposterous judgment call. "Of course, I am still banning your little play for all other cities ... it's impossible ... a play like that to be suddenly passed for everywhere,"¹¹⁴ exclaims Savva Lukich to the baffled Demogatsky, applying to "The Crimson Island" the same restriction which one of the censors at the Moscow Art Theatre imposed on Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins*.

The play's ending, which echoes such ridiculous transformations as those Bulgakov was forced to make by adding "The Internationale" to his play *The Days of the Turbins*, leaves open the question of the dramatist Dymogatsky's future. What exactly would he do were he to write another play, or knowing that his play would have to pass the ideological grill mandated by the

¹¹² Ibid., 342.

¹¹³ Ibid., 343.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 345.

Stalinist censorship, would he write another play in the first place? Bulgakov's *The Crimson Island* seems to imply that the playwright would have to censor himself, and that self-censorship is the most terrible condition in art because it would lead to prudential creativity predicated on self-interest, in short to the death of dramatic art, which permits no such political perversity. For, as Bulgakov wrote in his 1930 letter to Stalin, "There is no such thing as a writer who falls silent. If he falls silent, it means he was never a true writer. For if a true writer were to fall silent, then he would perish." Further, as Bulgakov stated in the same letter to Stalin, *The Crimson Island* was not "a pasquinade on the revolution," but a lampoon about the Central Repertoire Committee which "is killing creative thought; it is destroying the Soviet dramaturgy, and it will destroy it finally." Courageously, he adds, "I did not whisper these ideas, I put them in a dramatic lampoon and put the lampoon on the stage."¹¹⁵ By the time he wrote *The Crimson Island*, Bulgakov could still afford to hope that his plays would be performed on stage. But very soon afterwards, around the time when he was writing *A Cabal of Hypocrites*, it had become clear to him that all hope was lost and that a dramatist like him was condemned to perish in Stalin's Soviet Union.

The enemy Bulgakov saw in the Soviet theater world was the rhetorical clichés of communism used as a weapon in the struggle for political power and a major vehicle in reinforcing Marxist-Leninist ideology. The qualities he embraced were the playwright's political responsibility and creativity, not the ideologically committed anxiety. A man of the theater, Bulgakov had a vivid sense of writing his plays for the stage of history, so he did not remain silent; instead, he circumvented censorship by allowing them to be subversively engaged, through the alchemy of culture and politics.

¹¹⁵ Curtis, *Manuscripts*, 105–6.

III.

György Spiró's *The Impostor*: Rethinking Molière's *Tartuffe* for Communist Hungary

Like Bulgakov, the Hungarian playwright György Spiró was fascinated by Molière's irreverent attitude toward the church and duplicitous attitude toward the authority of Louis XIV in *Tartuffe*, a comedy with a happy ending. The play involves the unmasking and punishment of Tartuffe, the obvious impostor, and offers an opportunity for justice to be served, as Orgon, the deceived and foolish master, is allowed to keep his home and fortune by grace of the King's intervention. The sovereign's magnanimity extends the vindication of Orgon to his bourgeois household: his young and pretty second wife Elmire, his adult son Damis, and especially his daughter Mariane who is now free to marry her lover Valère without the fear of having Orgon give her hand in marriage to Tartuffe. Even Madame Pernelle, Orgon's humorously intolerant mother, who has been a strong advocate of Tartuffe's virtues and piety, ultimately "stands aghast and feels as if dropped from the clouds" at the latter's treachery, while acknowledging him to be a base and vile creature.¹¹⁶

Yet as funny as the play may be in magnifying religious hypocrisy, which is conceived as the play's overarching topic, and in being pointedly praiseful of the king's providential role as a token of Molière's own obedience, the comedy is plainly dark and Tartuffe's dramatic fall and going to prison are not entirely a laughing matter.¹¹⁷ Alert spectators cannot take great comfort

¹¹⁶ Molière, *Plays* (New York: Random House, 1950), 168. This is a prose version of the play. There is also a version in verse, in Richard Wilbur's translation, in which Madame Pernelle professes, "I'm thunderstruck, I'm utterly aghast." The latter translation, in this particular instance, is used in Spiró's play (98).

¹¹⁷ Francis Fergusson, in the introduction to *Plays by Molière* (New York: Random House, 1950), argues that "*The Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, and *The School for Wives* are

from the unmasking of Tartuffe's peculiar insincerity contained in theatrical speech or from the monarchic agency that abruptly brings about justice, not only in punishing the impostor but also in forgiving Orgon for having kept in his home the compromising papers that a friend had entrusted in his care.

More to the point, the subtle criticism of Tartuffe's "spiritual correctness" and the twist in the play's ending, which highlights patriarchal monarchy through the sovereign's benevolent actions, are not just moral; they are expressly political in that *Tartuffe* is an allegorical staging meant to undermine the absoluteness of Louis XIV's monarchy and the endemic Christian renewal precisely by magnifying the conflicts the play tries comically to resolve through comedic means.

What makes *Tartuffe* thoroughly modern and must have attracted Bulgakov's investment in his "Molièriana" project is the political content of Molière's theater that requires an understanding in relation to the historical content. At the time Molière wrote *Tartuffe*, after the end of the Fronde (1648–1653), increasing pressure was put on all society to obey and serve a central (Catholic) government. While consolidating his Catholic monarchy, Louis XIV, together with Richelieu's successor, Cardinal Mazarin, proceeded to reign over a "spiritual correctness," which left little room for independent thinking and maintained the fear of heresy.¹¹⁸ Regarded as the main danger to national unity, heresy could be defined in those days to be a mild view of Christian morality that looked benignly at human passions and values (theater going, costly dress, dinner parties) as one acceptable view of God's creation—as opposed to an austere and severe view of the same morality, which brutally condemned all forms of pleasure and worldliness. In this atmosphere of police-state that encouraged the emergence of Catholic brotherhoods—the infamous Cabal of the Devout (*cabale des dévots*) tasked with enforcing Catholic morality through lay directors of conscience¹¹⁹—

all high, or serious, comedy, and some have even said that they were tragic. It would be foolish to argue about the terms "comedy" and "tragedy" in this case; one certainly would not wish to say that Molière's comic vision did not have the depth usually attributed to tragedy" (p. 13).

¹¹⁸ Bert Cardullo, *Comparative Stages: Essays in the History of Euro-American Drama* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 62–3.

¹¹⁹ Formed by the *Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement* to restore proper public morals and a Catholic orthodoxy undermined by both growing secularism and competing

Molière created the composite portrait of Tartuffe, the impostor whose dramatic persona quite possibly echoed the case of such an individual, Charpy de Sainte-Croix, proven to have taken advantage of the faith of his patron to seduce the latter's wife.

Of even greater importance in *Tartuffe* appears to be the king's dismissal of law to pardon Orgon's grave offence in aiding an exiled enemy of the crown by bringing about ever so subtly the practice of the "state of exception" and the related decisionist theory of sovereignty, the opening sentence of which has become a shibboleth of Critical Theology: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."¹²⁰ By placing Orgon above the law all other people obey, the King reveals the essential hollowness of the moral and legal order that masks the monarchy's absolute authority, and this is precisely what Molière's *Tartuffe* craftily unveils. The semblance of harmony, which is secured by royal decree and on which social order depends, is ultimately a mere confidence trick. What makes the trick work suspending our disbelief is our implicit satisfaction in having justice and order restore the ambiguous equilibrium that Tartuffe's character engendered by scandalously breaking its rules, in an attempt to undermine the historical justice of monarchy to which Molière himself, anxious to have his play staged, ultimately seems to pay homage.

What appears to have mattered to Louis XIV's censors is that although Molière may well have been of the devil's party,¹²¹ siding with freethinkers in dismantling excessive piety, he cannot ultimately refrain in *Tartuffe* from exalting monarchic absolutism. The play teaches us that the King as the *deus ex machina* is essential in the context of Ludovician France as incontrovertible proof of the triumph of good over evil.

exponents of Christian renewal, the *cabale de dévots* were also attacking widespread blasphemy, nonattendance at church, and sources of moral laxity catalogued by Orgon's mother, Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe*. For an apologetic history of the *Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, see Raoul Allier, *Le Cabale des dévots* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970).

¹²⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹²¹ One of Molière's pious enemies, the Abbé de Rochemont's charged that in *Don Juan ou le festin de Pierre* [Don Juan or the Stone Guest] the playwright was "un diable incarné," intent on destroying orthodox belief, so the play was closed after only fifteen performances.

Mentioned only once in the end, when his intervention restores the natural order Tartuffe's diabolical power disrupts, the King is endowed with godlike powers and deploys a panoptic power of vision. He punishes the wicked Tartuffe and, through the "state of exception," absolves Orgon for the crime of keeping under his roof compromising documents. Yet not all is well despite this seemingly reassuring finale and the public fall into disgrace of Catholic brotherhoods like La Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement after their official suppression by the Paris Parliament in 1660. A play like *Tartuffe* shows that Molière channeled the heritage of the upheavals from which Western modernity was born, and that he had at his disposal the theater and the mode of experience comic theater provides to express the sentiment of the times. The collective practical experience of putting on a play that results in being of one mind in the shared humanity of the theatrical undertaking that *Tartuffe* asserts, implies an immediate and careful analysis of the multifaceted negotiations Molière's play shrewdly demands: that in the problematic denouement by which the King's divine intervention makes things right on stage, Molière's genius filters the theme, precisely, of hypocrisy, of concealment and simulation which *Tartuffe*, both the play and its author, embodies. Tartuffe, the private impostor, mirrors the political imposture of the King's absolute power, which Molière unmasks in the play at a time when absolute monarchy was perceived as the assertion of the divine right of kings, in line with theories of divine right that persisted throughout Western Europe until the French Revolution.

Molière's final exaltation of monarchic absolutism as a clever act of theatrical concealment and simulation in the context of Ludovican France directs the focus of *Tartuffe* on truth and performance, and requires an unraveling of the play's puzzles—a double task that must have fascinated not only Bulgakov but also contemporary playwrights like the Hungarian György Spiró. Like Bulgakov, who used *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and other themes and characters to mock the Soviet state, Spiró draws on *Tartuffe* to produce a veritable potpourri of his own creation in *The Impostor*, a play that points to deeper issues. Staged in 1979, at the height of the Cold War, Spiró's play craftily conceals the crushing power of Soviet expansionism and the hypocrisy of communism by carefully orchestrating the staging of Molière's *Tartuffe* in a Polish provincial town not only to protest Russia's

annexation of eighteenth-century Poland but mainly to denounce the Soviet occupation of Hungary.

Specifically, *The Impostor* deploys its political content in the context of an interesting dramatic transcreation by showcasing the rehearsal and subsequent premiere of Molière's *Tartuffe* at a time immediately following the partitioning of Poland in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat by Tsarist Russia. As odd as it may sound, genuine realism and dramatic spontaneity allow the audience to recognize in Spiró's clever plot and deceptive setting the political occupation of Hungary, as the rehearsal and staging of Molière's *Tartuffe* in occupied Poland at the time of Tsar Alexander are carefully constructed to mimic in *The Impostor* the contemporary reality of Hungary during the Stalinist era.

The series of analogous political, cultural, and social transformations that Poland and Hungary underwent during the Stalinist occupation of post-World War II Central and Eastern Europe lends support and recommends Spiró's theatrical transcreation as historically plausible. The comparable processes unfolding with startling similarity in Poland and Hungary, which question the Western notion that the Eastern bloc contained an undifferentiated group of countries with identical regimes and indistinguishable people summed up in the old adage that "Siberia starts at Checkpoint Charlie," are minutely detailed in Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1945–1956*. As Applebaum implies, although Stalinizing tactics like the building of workers' cities modeled after the Soviet Union's Magnitogorsk in Nowa Huta (Poland) and Sztálinváros (Hungary) in which *Homo sovieticus* would work, or like the sustained effort in the two countries to teach the psychology of subservience through cultural events, youths movements, and socialist realist aesthetics were not unique in the Soviet bloc, they were more robust and more grandiose in Poland and Hungary.¹²² Also, these two countries met the Soviets' tactics stronger opposition than in Romania or Bulgaria. Thus, despite the Soviets'

¹²² Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*. Of the book's eighteen chapters, only a few of the cases discussed are focused on the other countries of the Soviet bloc. Workers' cities were also built in Romania (Onești, Orașul Victoria) and Bulgaria. In Applebaum's excellent book the emphasis is clearly on Hungary and Poland, an aspect relating perhaps to the writer's close ties with Poland through her husband, Radek Sikorski, who served as the country's foreign minister.

concentrated efforts, many of the Poles and Hungarians had doubts about the results, making communism a tougher commodity to sell. Helping in the overall discontent were similar Catholic activities and the frequency of insurgent crowds that prompted the U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles to single out the two countries. In a message sent to the Soviet leaders in the face of escalating political unrest, Dulles remarked that “We do not see these states (Poland and Hungary) as potential military allies.”¹²³

Beyond such historically documented political commonality during the Soviet era, Poland and Hungary seemed united in their reliance on a similarly subversive culture to prepare an insurrectional overthrow of communism. Their writers’ groups and citizens were keen to resurrect national figures like the revered Polish actor, theater director and playwright Wojciech Bogusławski (1725–1829), who played a crucial role in establishing a real national theater with an artistic, social, and civic mission during Poland’s fight against Napoleon’s expansionist policies and the subsequent Russian occupation. Having staged Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz’s *The Return of the Deputy* (1791), Poland’s first-ever political comedy, Bogusławski wrote and staged a politically inciting sequel to this drama titled *Proof of the Nation’s Appreciation* (1791). Bogusławski’s interest in creating a repertoire focused on issues he considered most important to Poles relied on the theater and dramatic performance as theatrical illusion to address the troubled history of Poland in general and the Russian occupation of the country during the reign of Tsar Alexander in particular.

Bogusławski’s perception of the theater as a platform for disseminating national ideals and for fighting against foreign oppression captured Spiró’s interest and admiration. In his second novel *Exes*, which is dedicated to the Polish actor, Spiró calls Bogusławski “the greatest figure of the Polish theatre of his century.” According to Spiró, the success of the novel led the renowned Hungarian actor, Tamás Major, to ask Spiró to write a play for him that was based on it. Using as its own title the subtitle of Molière’s original, *The Impostor* is a stage adaptation of an episode in the novel, which was performed with enormous success at the József Katona Theatre in Budapest between 1983 and 1985. Hungarian audiences were quick to understand *The Impostor*

¹²³ Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

as Spiró's shrewd political exposé of Tsarist Russia and of contemporary Soviet Union, by relying on the theatrical means which Molière mastered, that is by inviting them to perceive Tsar Alexander and Stalin, the Red Tsar, as foils of Louis XIV, the king who embodies *in absentia* the monarchic absolutism and decisionist sovereignty that *Tartuffe* cleverly mocks.

The Impostor begins with Bogusławski's arrival in the provincial town of Vilna,¹²⁴ known today as Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, where the local theater group is about to stage not his own play, in accordance with a pre-existing agreement between the theater director Kazinski and Bogusławski, but Molière's *Tartuffe*—a better suited performance, chosen at the last minute to ease Kazinski's fear of the tsar's censorship after the Russian governor of the province had announced that he will be attending the opening night. As an emissary of Tsar Alexander, the Russian official's involvement in the theater echoes in more immediate times the Soviets' interest in the theater, well-documented in the case of Stalin who used to drag his Politburo henchmen to all kinds of performances, from ballet to opera and theater.

The choice of the town of Vilna as setting for Spiró's play is charged with additional meaning given the historically documented events taking place around the time when the fictional Bogusławski arrives here. In this town, in 1812, Napoleon's special ambassador, Count Narbonne, had been conferring with Tsar Alexander as a follow-up to the tsar's propositions to the French-controlled Grand Duchy of Warsaw to reconfigure a Kingdom of Poland, with himself as its king. Narbonne's uneasiness ("What I fear in Russia is her barbarity and her hugeness") expressed in the final interview with Napoleon before this meeting, was apparently confirmed when the tsar, holding in front of Narbonne a map of Russia that displayed its vastness, declared that he would not put down his arms until achieving his military goals.¹²⁵ Tsar Alexander's scheme for creating the Kingdom of Poland with

¹²⁴ Vilna is the name by which Lithuania's capital is known in Finnish, Latvian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Hebrew. Other options of the name in various languages of this multiethnic region are Vilnius (Lithuanian), Vilnae (Latin), Wilno (Polish), Wilna (German), Vilno (Czech), and Vilne (Yiddish). French, English, and Italian authors randomly took their pick from the above.

¹²⁵ For a detailed account of Napoleon's military maneuvers and his interactions with Tsar Alexander, see J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 297.

himself as its head became real after the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), when nationality for Poland was sacrificed, although a hypocritical nod in its direction was made by the proclamation of having the Kingdom of Poland united with the Russian crown. This type of political hypocrisy must have sounded particularly sinister to Spiró a century and a half later, when Stalin “united” all the countries of the Soviet bloc, including Poland and Hungary, under the political sovereignty of the Soviet Union.

Spiró’s admiration for Bogusławski, a militant actor also known as the “Father of Polish theater,” calls for a close reading of *The Impostor* vis-à-vis Bogusławski’s life and work that resonate with both the protagonist of *The Impostor* and with Spiró’s own platform as the author of a politically engaged theater in communist Hungary. Like Bogusławski, who during his rich theatrical career wrote several plays and translated, adapted, modified, and adjusted to Polish realities many French, German, English, and Italian plays, Spiró uses lengthy fragments from Molière’s *Tartuffe* in *The Impostor* while at the same time adapting the play to the realities of Soviet-occupied Hungary, which is itself mirrored in the Russian-occupied Poland of Bogusławski’s time, which serves as the play’s setting. In dramatically ingenious twists, the censorship imposed by the tsarist political lackeys like the drama critic Chodzko and the theater director Kazinski in Spiró’s play strive for figurative identification on multiple levels, beyond the immediate reference to the Tsar’s police of Bogusławski’s time. Specifically, the characters of Chodzko, the tsarist censor praised by the servile theater director as “the theatre critic who wields a most discerning pen,”¹²⁶ and of Kazinski, who defends his hypocrisy with claims of “discussing only points of dramaturgy and not mixing politics into it”¹²⁷ whenever he has to obscure his collaboration with the state censors, are studded with literal and political details. Irritable and duplicitous during the rehearsals, the two are reminiscent of not only such emissaries from the Party’s Repertoire Committee like the laughable Savva Lukich or the pathetic theater director Genady Panfilovich, lampooned in Bulgakov’s *The Crimson Island*, but also of recognizable exponents of the Stalinist censorship in communist Hungary which *The Impostor* ultimately targets.

¹²⁶ Albert Tezla, ed., *Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays* (London: Forest Books, 1992), 178. All quotations from *The Impostor* are from this edition.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

The persecution of writers and playwrights like Spiró or Bulgakov in the communist era is well documented today, and Molière's frequent brushes with the Catholic Church censors or Louis XIV's court have been recorded by literary and theater critics. However, not much is known about censorship in Bogusławski's Poland. During the turbulent years of Bogusławski's life, state reforms in Poland led to reformist camps, whose goals were championed in some of the artist's most famous works, like *The Presumed Miracle, or Krakovians and Highlanders* (1794), which premiered in Warsaw on the eve of the Kosciuszko's Insurrection and was banned by censors after just three performances. On account of the production's political allusions, Bogusławski was even due to be arrested but apparently escaped this fate through the intervention of the Great Royal Marshall Moszynski. After fleeing to Lviv, Bogusławski staged once again *Krakovians and Highlanders* after extended negotiations with censors there, and curiously enough, followed this with a production of *Hamlet* in 1797, exactly two hundred years to the date when Spiró's *The Impostor* was staged in Budapest.

Having introduced Shakespeare to the Polish stage, Bogusławski began staging productions based on translations of other plays, primarily of Racine and Molière, and as an actor himself he began playing leading men. After he handed over the directorship of the National Theatre he had established in Warsaw, Bogusławski started performing with his own troupe appearing on other stages, including that in Vilnius. This appears to be the time in Bogusławski's life captured in *The Impostor*, with the famous actor arriving in the city to stage and act in his own opera only to learn that, unbeknownst to him, the local theater director Kazinski had to cancel at the prospect of the Russian governor's attendance. According to Kazinski, "in the provinces [where] the censors keep their eyes wide open," Bogusławski's opera had been banned "because it's about Russian-Polish relations."¹²⁸ In the attempt to accommodate such changes, Kazinski chooses to stage Molière's *Tartuffe* and asks Bogusławski to perform the title role of the play which not only the fictional, but the real Bogusławski too, had in fact translated into Polish previously.

After addressing the ensuing squabble about the terms of the new contract, *The Impostor* dramatizes the actors' rehearsal and actual performance of

¹²⁸ Ibid., 158.

Molière's *Tartuffe* with a modified finale that introduces not only a slight departure from *Tartuffe*'s original ending but also an abrupt shift in focus: from Molière's France the audience is transported to the Russian-occupied Poland of Bogusławski's time, which stands for Spiró's contemporary Hungary. Further, the emplotment of Molière's play is cleverly conceived. By pointing the rehearsing actors and, implicitly, the audience toward Molière's game of duplicity in *Tartuffe*, Bogusławski challenges through his incisive commentaries the traditionally accepted views in the portrayal of Tartuffe and ultimately showcases in *The Impostor* the political travesties which Molière and Spiró, following the model of the *grand classique*, stage in their plays.

Thus the immediate twist Spiró's play brings to Molière's *Tartuffe* is the unmasking of Molière's own conceit in the presentation of Tartuffe, the presumed impostor. This process, which becomes Bogusławski's task as soon as the rehearsal begins, is challenged by traditional views of Tartuffe as a master of deception and the embodiment of some of the most despicable vices. Even Bulgakov, who should have known better, sees him as "the most complete and consummate swindler, liar, scoundrel, informer, and spy—a hypocrite, lecher, and seducer of other men's wives."¹²⁹ From this perspective, Molière's play also appears to advance the perception of Orgon and his family as good members of the bourgeoisie, a microcosm of the nation Louis XIV personifies. So the threat Tartuffe embodies hangs not only over Orgon, but over the king and his kingdom as well.

However, Bogusławski injects a humane tenderness into rehearsal showing the actors that no matter how manipulative and dishonest Tartuffe may be, he is not the only character in the play who wears the mask of hypocrisy. In fact, according to Bogusławski, Molière leaves no character in the play a stranger to the game of duplicity. After Orgon learns that Tartuffe has been deceiving him, he is told by Cléante, his brother-in-law, to learn to "strip off the mask and learn what virtue means."¹³⁰ Orgon is clearly displaying a public mask of piety recognizable in the days when "directors of conscience" like Tartuffe were installed in private homes to ensure conformity to Catholic doctrine in the days subsequent to the Fronde, when all the French bourgeois were expected to serve Louis XIV "with wise

¹²⁹ David Partikian, "Critical Essay on Tartuffe," in *Drama for Students*, vol. 18, ed. David A. Galens, (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

¹³⁰ Lisa Brent, "Critical Essay on Tartuffe," in Galens, *Drama for Students*.

and loyal heart.” Hiding and eavesdropping to protect the interests of her mistress, Mariane, the feisty servant Dorine also wears various masks, such as the one whose role is to remind young lovers how the world really works. And Mariane takes for granted that a woman is expected to wear the mask of indifference with a man she loves in order to conceal her true desire for him. She tells Dorine:

But if I show defiance to a parent,
Won't my love for Valère be too apparent?
Shall I give up, for all his charms and beauty,
The modesty that is a woman's duty?¹³¹

Finally, when Valère and Mariane argue foolishly as they try to preserve masculine pride and feminine modesty, they too attempt to conceal their feelings from each other for, as Valère tells Mariane,

To show our love for one who's turned us down
Is to be both a coward and a clown.

Not to be outdone, Orgon's impetuous and immoderate son, Damis is a bit too keen on establishing Tartuffe's erotic designs on Elmire, going as far as to hide in her closet to spy on him. Could it be that his overly protective behavior is only a mask hiding that he is head over heels in love with his stepmother? Even the gullible Orgon acknowledges that possibility when he tells Elmire later on,

Madame, I know a few plain facts,
And one is that you're partial to my rascal son.¹³²

The point here could be that Orgon knows that he is not loved—not by his son, his daughter, or his wife. So he turns to Tartuffe and refuses to accept the possibility of betrayal until it becomes obvious. All along, however, Orgon is sincere in his love for Tartuffe, so sincere as to prompt an inter-

¹³¹ Richard Wilbur, trans., *Molière: The Misanthrope and Tartuffe* (New York: Harcourt, 1993), 220.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 228, 266.

pretation dramatized in 1962 by the French director Roger Planchon who argued that in his actions toward Tartuffe “Orgon is not stupid but profoundly homosexual. It’s obvious that he doesn’t know it—the play would fall apart if he were conscious of it.”¹³³ Molière could have conceivably envisioned Orgon as a latent homosexual of whose tendency Tartuffe takes advantage, for homosexuality certainly flourished in seventeenth-century France. The man who brought Molière and his troupe to the attention of Louis XIV had been “Monsieur,” the king’s younger—and gay—brother.

Nonetheless, homosexuality, latent or otherwise, is far from the only explanation for the close attachment between Orgon and Tartuffe. The binding element in Molière’s game of concealment and theatrical deceit appears to be Elmire, whose name encodes the old French for physician (*mire*) attested by *Le vilein mire*, the *fabliau* on which *Le Médecin malgré lui* is based. The task Molière assigns Elmire is therapeutic and the instrument she deploys to a therapeutic end is the *mirror* inscribed shrewdly once again in her name—in the verbs *mirer* and *admirer*. By confronting Orgon she triggers his shame, which breaks through his narcissistic defenses to restore the psychic clarity Tartuffe’s gross flattery clouds. She holds up a mirror and, as she urges Orgon to see himself, she too puts on a mask of false passion with Tartuffe to “lure this hypocrite to drop off his mask” and show his true intentions. (This too, by the way, is Molière’s playful way to remind us of his subtle game as the essence of the hypocrite is to *pass undetected*; for the sinister, true hypocrite, is indistinguishable from the role he or she plays.)

As Bogusławski presses on in Spiró’s play with the reevaluation of Molière’s impostor, he points out that Tartuffe has been with the family long enough to know all their intimate secrets, including the very serious one of Orgon’s concealment of the letters from an enemy of the King. So Tartuffe also pursues Elmire because he knows that she married Orgon when she was young and clearly does not love him, maybe even cheats on him with her stepson. As Bogusławski points out, Tartuffe has some of the most moving lines in the play, indicating that he is sincere in his declaration of love for Elmire, which he concludes by saying:

¹³³ Robert Cardullo, “Molière’s Tartuffe,” *Explicator* 67, no. 3 (2009): 173.

It is, I know, presumptuous on my part
To bring you this poor offering of my heart.
And it is not my merit, Heaven knows,
But your compassion on which my hopes repose.
You are my peace, my solace, my salvation;
On you depends my bliss—or desolation
I bide your judgment and, as you think best,
I shall be either miserable or blessed.¹³⁴

For an elucidation of Molière's clever conceit in the portrayal of Tartuffe, Elmire's character offers yet another helpful hint in the embedded *mirage* of her name that suggests the power of seduction she has over Tartuffe. Quoting Tartuffe's declaration of love to Elmire, Bogusławski tells the actors that it represents "the most lyrical part of the play." In addition to being "a beautiful declaration," Tartuffe's words also reveal the mirage-like attraction she holds over him:

Before your seraph glance, divinely sweet,
My heart's defenses crumbled in defeat,
And nothing, fasting, prayer, or tears might do
Could stay my spirit from adoring you.¹³⁵

Mesmerized, Tartuffe becomes a victim to Elmire's charms and lowers the guard naturally raised by her earlier rejection of him. A powerful word, *mirage* is the objective correlative of *l'imaginaire*, the binding element in the theater. Mirage is the world itself in that the projections, transferences, substitutions, and displacements *l'imaginaire* continuously operates are espoused in the theatrical illusion. Or rather, "life is a stage" reflects the ability of theater both to mirror and to manipulate life as efficiently as Elmire does by suspending our disbelief. And theater can also mend the world by replicating it. In the process it institutes an autonomy by which the scene explicitly espouses, on the theater's behalf, a duplicitousness that gives the lie to the comic *bonhomie* that meets the eye at the first glance. The inter-

¹³⁴ Wilbur, *Molière*, 240.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

pretive problems this raises engage the very nature of theatrical art. Bogusławski's interpretation of *Tartuffe* does not claim that this classic work does not deserve the stature accorded; he claims rather that *Tartuffe* has been systematically misread precisely on the scope of the moral rectitude the play's canonic status obliges us to impute.

Thus, the problematic denouement of Molière's play cannot satisfy Bogusławski's dramatic scope. In the final scene of *The Impostor* the king's decree is not heard on the stage because Rybak, the actor playing the role of the police officer dispatched by the King to take *Tartuffe* to prison and give praise to the King for his wise and just rule, is removed from the stage and pushed into the awaiting carriage¹³⁶ by the governor's men thanks to Bogusławski's shrewd maneuvering. In Rybak's absence, Bogusławski takes over the stage to voice in a mocking tone a hypocritical praise to the tsar of Russia whose dignitary has no choice but to hear it before storming out of the theater. On the stage, thanks to servile theater director Kazinski's décor, the double-headed-eagle emblematic of the Tsar suggests to Spiró's audiences the contemporary hammer-and-sickle symbol of the proletariat imposed by Stalinist governments from Moscow to Budapest and throughout the Soviet-occupied countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In offering a hypocritical praise of the Russian tsar, Bogulawski is the true impostor, whose not-so-subtle provocation offers Spiró's own play its dramatic scope: Bogusławski's protest in the play mimics the implied dissent of the playwright's contemporary audience forced to live in the Soviet-occupied Hungary.

Read through the lens of the political denunciation of Stalinism, Spiró's play reveals the play's running analogy of the relation between the historical past of Russia's territorial appropriation of Poland and the Soviet Union's occupation of Hungary. Such a complex parallel is established from the very first exchanges when Bogusławski's question to the Stage Hand "Is the theater of Vilna" prompts the snappy response, "What did you think it was, old man, eh? The salt mines of Siberia?" Though amusing, such a retort offers an immediate identification of Poland with Hungary as victims of the

¹³⁶ One wonders whether the awaiting carriage is an intended allusion to Bulgakov's *A Cabal of Hypocrites*. In that play Bulgakov has Molière's faithful troupe arrange for a carriage to whisk him away from the Musketeers who have invaded the theater to arrest him.

Russian expansive aggression and political subjugation, albeit at different moments in history.

The sustained parallel between Poland's past and Hungary's present communist era throws into focus two of the most recognizable aspects of Soviet domination in the communist bloc: the relentless censorship and the interdiction of using religious references articulated in Kazinski's agitated admonition to the remark that Bogusławski can say anything on stage while enacting Molière's *Tartuffe*:

There'll be half a dozen gentlemen at least sitting out there, with a script on their laps! He can't say just anything ... (*slaps his hand over the script*) ... except what's down here! What's been approved! (*to Bogusławski*) We've had to do some revision ... Mustn't address religious sentiment ... The word "religion" is out. Otherwise the text is intact.¹³⁷

The impassioned speech of Skibinski, one of the demoralized actors in Vilna, superimposes the present Stalinist era of Spiró's play on a threefold historical drama—the partitioning of Poland, Kosciuszko's rebellion, and the country's subsequent appropriation as a result of Napoleon's losses to Russia's Tsar Alexander I; the more recent division of Poland between Hitler and Stalin in 1939; and, most recently, the post–World War II inclusion of communist countries like Poland and Hungary in the Soviet bloc:

When first I started acting, we still had a Poland. It wasn't divided. Annexed. Then we lost her, but had our illusions. Uprising. Napoleon. War ... But now, now we don't even have our illusions any more. No sense of purpose. They drag people away even for a joke. For a day. Sometimes two. Just because we speak a different language and cross ourselves the other way around ... there's not even one itsy-bitsy illusion we can call our own. No illusion ... We've been dumped. Written off to Russia.¹³⁸

The commonality of religion in Poland and Hungary, both predominantly Catholic countries, brings up their unity in isolation vis-à-vis Russia's

¹³⁷ Tezla, *Hungarian Plays*, 160.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

Orthodox brand of faith, a distinction immediately identified in the different way by which the faithful of the two denominations cross themselves, from left to right and from right to left, respectively. Even more substantially, the suggestion of unity between Poland and Hungary resonates in their being dumped in the Soviet bloc by a presumably indifferent Western Europe that could not stave off Stalin's game at Yalta in 1945 when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe felt that they "have been dumped, written off to Russia."

Adding to the sense of utter despair ringing in Skibinski's words is his lament over the new generation, reduced to "rat on each other, they plot, they intrigue ... And not because they're wicked, mind you. Just because they've got nothing to believe in. No future, Maestro! No future!"¹³⁹ Spiró's thoughts are clearly fueled by the sentiments of all Hungarians, articulated in similar accents in Géza Bereményi's play *Halmi*, a play written in the same year as Spiró's *The Impostor*. Here the young protagonist Halmi reaches dizzying lows of self-esteem that are transformed into consummate plotting, irresponsible behavior, and destructive desires underlying his actions and relations with family and friends. *Halmi*'s embedded plot is that in Hungary communism has destroyed the young.

In the middle of the national despair and in dealing with a demoralized people, whether in Bogusławski's time or Spiró's contemporary Hungary, or of Molière's and Bulgakov's before them, the domain of theater and performance can hold a very special role, as evidenced in the exchanges between Bogusławski and the actors, whose courageous opposition counters the subservient attitude of Kazinski and Chodzko. Pushing the audience to recognize in *The Impostor* Spiró's critique of the Russians' imperialist ideology, Kazinski calls the theater "just a lot of clap-trap,"¹⁴⁰ cunningly avoids a position of institutional authority, and sees the presence of the Russian governor as an opportunity to shake hands and meet "a powerful master on whose good will depends the fate of thousands of Poles."¹⁴¹ Lacking faith in the institution of theater he is complicit in disparaging, the critic Chodzko's servile attempts to please the Russian masters give way to a deeper diagnosis of the infirmity of drama critics and of dramatic structure

¹³⁹ Tezla, *Hungarian Plays*, 171.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 217.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 191.

itself, especially when he proclaims the play and theatrical performance to be “a most suitable vehicle for the Poles of Vilna to demonstrate their loyalty to Russia.”¹⁴²

But as the play offers the Russian governor an opportunity “to shake hands with Polish culture” and to speak in the language of transparent Stalinist slogans of the Tsar’s “humanitarian and wise policies,”¹⁴³ Bogusławski mockingly reverses to their advantage the subaltern position of the Poles, turning them from occupied into resistant subjects to the tsar’s imperial authority. In an improvised and affecting monologue he inserts into *The Impostor*’s altered version of *Tartuffe*’s finale, Bogusławski confesses his sins and viciousness and asks for fair and prudent punishment with clownish and melodramatic exaggeration:

Gently, mon Générale, stay right where you are;
Your mighty soul, though generous and human,
Views all things discernment and acumen;
My sins, my vicious crimes by the dozen
Are well known to you; you they could not becozen.
You saw right through me, I bow my head
Before your fair and prudent punishment.
No verdict’s too harsh on me: I deserve it,
Take me off to prison this very minute!
But before you do, I beg you, Sire,
And bless this house by order—of the Czar!¹⁴⁴

Having altered completely Molière’s finale, Bogusławski’s dramatic hyperbole performs servitude to better articulate bitter resentment for his country’s occupation. Further, his subaltern articulation of the tsar’s imperial authority becomes shorthand for the actor’s consciousness and his theatrical tool against political oppression, provoking the laughter of the audience while implicitly displaying a topic of great relevance not only for the Russian-occupied Poland of Bogusławski’s time but mainly for Spiró’s Hungary in the communist era. In the bridging of the past with the present

¹⁴² Ibid., 204.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 208.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 229.

and in the hybridity of theater and politics Bogusławski's hypocritical candor, which infuriates the Russian Governor but humorously circumvents Hungary's communist censorship, recasts in the play's contemporary present the Soviets' systematic arrests and trumped up crimes perennially imputed to the country's innocent citizens for whom a dramatically articulated political theater and consummate performance unveil Stalinism as a most insidious and lethally poisonous ideology.

PART 2
SHAKESPEARE
IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

IV.

Stalinist “Traitors” and “Saboteurs”: Matéi Vişniec’s *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold*

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Languages* Marx and Engels critiqued ideology as a false and pernicious consciousness that manufactures the interests of the upper classes. By contrast, Lenin related ideology to the campaigns of political power and defined ideology as a strategic claim to power and a major vehicle for reinforcing power. In *What Is to Be Done*, Lenin discusses ideology as consciousness from without, that triggers revolution.¹

After having promoted the Bolsheviks’ interests, ideology became in Stalin’s time a deliberately created system of visions and recognizable metaphors that projected into reality the ideals of communism. Ideology was communism in action, ferociously underscoring the elimination of private property and class exploitation as the distinguishable characteristics of a Soviet society defined primarily by the rejection of capitalism. Unlike Lenin, however, Stalin orchestrated the continually changing course of culture and ideology and reserved for himself the permanent usurpation of ideological power by new words. If Stalin was a master of authoritarian ruling by constantly reinventing ideology, one of the principal devices of his absolutist rule was the Stalin cult, whose integratory function was visible everywhere in the statues, portraits, cast metal, printed fabric—the entire arsenal of Soviet popular culture that bore the unmistakable imprint of Stalin’s face.²

¹ Vladimir I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done* (New York: International Publishers, 1929).

² Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (London: Norton, 1990). In this book, the author demonstrates convincingly that Stalin actively propagated his own cult, but he speaks about it as being the outward manifestation of Stalin’s megalomania. In reality, it can be argued, as Stephen Kotkin does in his

In the USSR, where Stalin was a familiar presence as a warm father, teacher, and friend figure, the communist power was reconfirmed by newer and newer names and key metaphors, with the single purpose of holding the power in Stalin's hands while simultaneously smashing, in the name of revolutionary vigilance, those he perceived as traitors or threats to his power or as phantom-like rivals. From his own isolated world in the corridors of the Kremlin, Stalin gradually merged the all-encompassing ideology he had the chronic need to repeat in imaginary takeovers of the power he already had into an all-consuming paranoia that led to endless purges, imprisonments in the Gulag, and executions to retaliate for imagined conspiracies.

Stalin's reign of terror displayed periods of thaw in its earlier stages. As Katerina Clark convincingly argues, in the early 1930s the Soviet Union embarked on an extraordinary appropriation of the Western literature, an obsession with and reverence for books of the "world culture" like Lord G. Byron's *Childe Harold*, Georg W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, or Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*, among many others that were translated into Russian alongside Shakespeare, Goethe, and Heinrich Heine. This *Bildung* (cultural formation) was after all in line with the dictates of Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) to support the rise of a world literature as a culmination of the literary evolution. In the spirit of "the universal interdependence of nations," forging such a literature was perceived as an important step in the direction of bringing the new Soviet state to the cultural level that would recommend it as a world leader.

Stalin was seen by many intellectuals as the promoter of a great culture, and Russian writers and artists saw themselves as part of a pan-European intellectual space that included among others Georg Lukacs, Walter Benjamin, Leon Feuchtwanger, Ernest Hemingway, André Gide, Louis Aragon, and André Malraux. Hobnobbing primarily in France and Germany with this elite were some of the Soviet Union's own "Cosmopolitan Patriots" like Sergei Eisenstein, the film and theater director, and Ilya Ehrenburg, the

book *The Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, that Stalin's tirelessly self-promoting machine drew on the myth of his own persona, an aspect that may explain why his popularity remained alive for millions people.

poet, journalist, and novelist.³ In 1935 renowned figures like Bertolt Brecht traveled to the Soviet Union, Samuel Beckett was corresponding with Eisenstein and eager to come from Paris, and Lee Strasberg was preaching the Stanislavskian method, which came to dominate American stage and screen acting. At home, in the Soviet Union, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the director of the Moscow Art Theatre, was directing Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in the great tradition of classical tragedy, with Euripides and Shakespeare as his models in a production for which the actress who played Anna Karenina was wearing a toga and playing a role befitting Phaedra or Medea.

Later on however, in the cultural games of the more mature Soviet Union, Stalin's involvement reached new heights and veered in a different direction. In popular posters like Viktor Govorkov's "Stalin in the Kremlin Cares for Everyone of Us," he began to be presented as a towering figure, in the shadow of a single Kremlin tower and always wearing a military uniform. While deeply devoted to the cares of the nation, Stalin appeared to also play the role of the sentinel concerned with the purity of the Party and its ideology, tasked with overseeing the link between culture and the political life.

The power of the state to emulate the new man, or as Stalin put it, to be the "engineer of human souls," finds its earliest expression in Nikolai Bukharin's 1921 treatise *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*:

If we examine each individual in his development, we shall find that at bottom he is filled with the influences of his environment, as the skin of a sausage is filled with sausage-meat. Man "is trained" in the family, in the street, in the school. He speaks a language which is the product of social evolution; he thinks thoughts that have been devised by a whole series of preceding generations; he is surrounded by other persons with all their modes of life; he has before his eyes an entire system of life, which influences him second by second. Like a sponge he constantly absorbs new impressions. And thus he is "formed" as an individual. Each individual at

³ For a detailed discussion of this group of four "cosmopolitan patriots," see Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome*, 30.

bottom is filled with a social content. The individual himself is a collection of concentrated social influences, united in a small unit.⁴

The Party that controlled the Soviet state and executed the cultural purge under Stalin's orders was responsible for shaping this "content," as Stalinism began to implement a rehumanizing of man, a redefinition of his essence, and, contrary to common perceptions, not a destruction of it, simply because this "essence" did not exist historically in Russia. In the previous era, at the time of tsarist power, the absence of such humanizing essence is admirably captured in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, a novel whose tragic protagonist, Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov, suggests that the individual is merely an empty carcass, powerless to influence larger social or political events. As the title of the novel reminds us, what we see with Western eyes is different from the realities seen with the narrator's eyes, his perception of Russia as "the snow covered country ... a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history."⁵ In an earlier work, titled "Autocracy and War," Conrad speaks prophetically about the future of Russia as a country that will find herself, on awakening from tsarist oppression, "possessed of no language, a monstrous full-grown child having first to learn the ways of living thought and articulate speech."⁶ A son of Polish nationalists who had lost their lives fighting against the oppressive regime of Tsarist Russia, Conrad seems to have anticipated in uncanny ways the catastrophic ideology of Stalin's Soviet Union, the state's inhumanity and brutality in the shaping of its own people and of its oppressive culture of fear and totalitarian control.

Self-reliance, consciousness, and conscience, which were the staples of a long history of Western metaphysics, what Bukharin calls "the bourgeois sausage" that in Western Europe was filled with the notions of liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness—had all been scraped away in the Russian soul even before they had a chance to surface. From the days of Peter the Great, when absolutist power and terror reigned supreme, through

⁴ Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 98.

⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

its historically distinct imperial framework, Tsarist Russia reflected forms of violence, both physical and epistemological, that are uniquely rooted in its past. And so, the physical destruction and rehumanization of the masses engineered first by Lenin and then by Stalin in Soviet Russia, had been long preceded by their philosophical negation and by the absent advancements of civilization and modernity made possible on a national scale in the Western world.

The Great Terror, which engulfed the country in a murderous spree, began progressing slowly and steadily from the summer of 1936 to 1939. In 1937 alone, 937,750 Soviets were arrested for counterrevolutionary crimes, and of them 353,074 were executed.⁷ At least 600 published authors were arrested, almost one-third of the members of the Union of Soviet Writers. Terror, fear, and suspicion frayed the fabric of culture and fatally poisoned the moral climate, while the West maintained an ambivalent wonder, particularly regarding the fate of the Soviet writers and artists. Show trials, like Bukharin's, revealed the arbitrariness of the purges and their insubstantiality. The accused had no access to documentation, huge reams of written accusations, to which only the prosecutor general, in Bukharin's case, Andrei Vyshinsky, kept referring by careful references to each line and paragraph. Written reports of hundreds of pages were generated to support the indictment because Stalin and his regime of terror needed a written narrative to underwrite it.

All these cultural zigzags simply meant that communism was implementing a radical materialization of terror, as Stalin was increasingly aware of the need to control the artists and writers who could reshape the map of world culture. They were blamed for participating in "conspiratorial terrorist organization," as agents of foreign intelligence services through their contacts with André Malraux and André Gide, who, in Stalin's imagination, had become Western enemies of the Soviet Union.

The political charade and shift to the Soviet cultural purges began immediately following Gorky's death, with André Gide's arrival in Moscow to speak on behalf of the Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture that was headed by Malraux. Stalin's fears that these exchanges with the

⁷ For detailed information on the purges, see Jonathan Brent, *Inside the Stalinist Archives: Discovering the New Russia* (New York: Atlas, 2008), 162.

West were an ill omen for the Soviet Union materialized when Gide, who had appeared to be delighted by everything while in Moscow, condemned everything he had seen once he was back in Paris in his book, *Return from the USSR* (*Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*), which came out in 1936. Certainly, one is left to wonder why Gide had been so enthusiastic about the USSR in the first place since the last days of his visit witnessed the open Moscow trial of the “anti-Soviet united center” (the old Bolsheviks who were opposed to Stalin) and their execution two months after Gorky’s death.

Gide’s change of attitude toward the Soviet Union was now perceived by Stalin as an act of sabotage, a calculated move to discredit the USSR. Declaring both Gide and Malraux to be spies and saboteurs, and determined to send a terrifying message to the intellectuals, Stalin ordered the arrest of all the Soviet writers who had been in contact with the two French writers, such as Babel and Meyerhold, after having them publicly humiliated. With prompting from the Kremlin, the politically designated patriarch of the theater, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who had directed Bulgakov’s *A Cabal of Hypocrites* after Stanislavsky’s withdrawal due to well-documented disagreements with the playwright, was summoned first to suppress Meyerhold through clever methods. With aesthetic detachment, Nemirovich-Danchenko announced that “the attitude toward theatres has changed strongly: that a previously revered trend like Meyerholdism in the theatre has lost not only its prestige, but all interest!”⁸

Arrested in June 1939 on a signed order by Beria, head of the secret police, in blue ink, which meant that he was destined for execution, Meyerhold was accused, like Babel, of “links to foreign powers,” a favorite allegation of the Soviet era.⁹ He was forced to confess his “guilt” and inform on the other Soviet writers through methods described in Meyerhold’s own words in a petition to Vyacheslav Molotov:

I was beaten—a sick sixty-year-old man, they made me lie down on the floor, beating me with a rubber hose on the sole of my feet and back, when I was seated in a chair, they used the rubber to hit my feet (from above, with great force) and along the legs from the knee to the top of the feet.

⁸ Quoted in K. Rudnitski, *Meyerhold* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971), 285.

⁹ Katerina Clark discusses the indictment as a fixture on the circuit of Soviet accusations in *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 270.

And in subsequent days, when those parts of my legs were covered with large internal bruises, they beat me again on those red-blue-yellow spots with the hose, and the pain was so strong that it felt as if they were pouring boiling water on those painful, sensitive spots (I screamed and wept with pain). They beat my back with that hose, they beat my face with big swings from above ... the investigator kept repeating and threatening me: "If you don't sign (that is, make it up?), we will keep beating you leaving only your head and right hand untouched, the rest we'll turn into a piece of formless bloody chopped meat." And I signed everything.

In the general madness of the period, the fate of major figures like Meyerhold, who had been subjected to seven months of torture, was decided by Stalin personally: when he put two vertical lines next to the name of the accused, it meant a ten-year sentence; one line meant execution.¹⁰ For Stalin, who put one line on Meyerhold's file, the removal of an important opponent was just a winning move in a political game not that different from those of feudal suzerainty times when historical rulers like Ivan the Terrible (1530–84), Stalin's acknowledged hero, were often masters of murderous designs.¹¹ The cosmic demonism of such figures was often dramatized, as in the case of the Russian ruler who became the hero of Eisenstein's movie *Ivan grozny* (1943), which Stalin himself commissioned, or the "rudely stamped" Richard III, who became the historical protagonist of Shakespeare's play as a "lump of foul deformity."¹² Ironically enough, the historical Richard III received recent notoriety after his remains were found beneath a parking lot in 2012, and a new burial took place, 530 years later, on March 26 in Leicester, England.

Captured in the imaginary account of Matéi Vişniec's play *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* (subsequently

¹⁰ This draconic approach is detailed in Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 119.

¹¹ Punning on Stalin's avowed role model, Martin Amis titled his book about Stalin *Koba the Dread*. Koba, as it is well-known, was Stalin's nickname in his youth. Ivan the Terrible's glorified status in the Soviet Union, which was the direct result of Stalin's admiration for the murderous ruler, is examined in other chapters in connection with Tsar Peter and with the close association of religious and state practices in the Soviet Union.

¹² William Shakespeare, "Richard III," in *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.2.57.

mentioned here as *Richard III-Meyerhold*), Meyerhold's arrest, torture, and execution, which are documented in the NKVD dossiers, provide not only a dramatic representation of how Stalinist terror worked and what the meaning of it must have been to Meyerhold, but also a powerful and moving document that goes beyond saying that the Soviet system was mad or that it was "a monstrous anomaly," as Robert Conquest states in the "Introduction" to *Arrested Voices*.¹³ In the traumatic deployment of Vişniec's play, Meyerhold's torment and execution provide a case study of a regime of ruthless cruelty that manipulated the assassination of its artists to legitimize the Soviet state, Stalin's seizure of total power and, as the dramatic development suggests, his criminal alliances in the international arena. Most important, Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* proposes a full engagement with the history of Stalinism's horrific oppression and violence, artfully adapted to revive and reconfigure the political dimensions of a classical Shakespearean play as "a free adaptation based on the last nightmare of the director, Vsevolod Meyerhold before being killed in prison in 1940 under the orders of Generalissimo Josef Vissarionovitch Stalin."¹⁴

Born in communist Romania in 1956, Vişniec was well aware of the tactics of Stalinism, whose political persecutions he had to endure until he defected to France in 1987. Currently one of France's most acclaimed dramatists, Vişniec continues to be attracted to theater as politics-by-other means and focuses on communism as an underlying ideology in several of his plays. Most of his characters become symbolic for the oppressive conditions in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, reflected in the lives of individuals.

Like Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the final play of a tetralogy, which deals on the surface with English wars of the fifteenth century primarily to ad-

¹³ Vitaly Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime* (New York: Free Press, 1996), x.

¹⁴ Matéi Vişniec, *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* (Paris: Editions Lansman, 2005). English version published in the anthology Matéi Vişniec, *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*, ed. Jozefina Komporaly (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2015). In this book Komporaly offers a detailed introduction to Vişniec's political theater, centered on a coming to terms of sorts with communism and its legacy. In a Romanian context, Vişniec scholarship is best represented by Daniela Magiaru, who published widely on the playwright, including the study *Mirajul cuvintelor calde* [The charm of spirited words] (Bucharest: Editura Institutul Cultural Român, 2010).

dress the playwright's current concerns and anxieties provided by England's war with Spain and the uncertainties of succession to the throne imperiled by unruly or self-serving captains like the Earl of Essex, Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* uses the protagonist director's putative staging of a Shakespearean classic to underscore the abuses of Stalinist absolutism not only in Soviet Russia but also in other countries of the Stalinist bloc, like Vişniec's native Romania. Further, in foregrounding Meyerhold's ordeal in the would-be staging of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in order to denounce the Stalinist terror, Vişniec brings to life more than the cruelty of a society organized around Stalin's paranoia and destructive power that claimed the lives of hundreds of artists; on the next theatrical level, Vişniec's dramatic agenda is to show Stalin as a monster whose barbarity made Richard III and his crimes seem like water off a tyrannosaur's back.

The ethos of the Soviet Union dictated that Stalin be Stalin, the Man of Steel. Having understood that notion, Stalin is reputed to have told his son, Vasily, "You're not Stalin, and I'm not Stalin,"¹⁵ a comment taken loosely to mean that Soviet communism was a steely entity whose characteristics appeared in full display in Stalin's leadership. The transpersonal nature of Stalin's power is suggested admirably in Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* in the ghostly appearances of the Generalissimo: in uniform and smoking a pipe, he is an abstract and detached entity, a barely visible but omnipresent ideological imprint throughout the play.

In the context of the modern European space Stalin defined absolutism or sovereignty more explicitly than any other political leader. His total control could be defined through its nonsubstitutable character, in the sense that he was the indivisible figure in whose place no one could stand.¹⁶ He was, in short, the Generalissimo whose decisions cannot be subsumed by the system of legal codes or norms precisely because "sovereign is he who

¹⁵ This account is quoted from Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 290.

¹⁶ I am quoting here Christopher Pye's reference to political absolutism in his book *The Storm at Sea. Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 125, a reference to Jean Bodin's *The Six Books of a Commonwealth*, ed. Douglas McRae (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 159–62, 169–73.

decides on the exception.”¹⁷ A discussion of the sovereign act from a topological perspective and with input from Paul Hirst’s observation that “all legal orders have an outside,”¹⁸ highlights the sovereign act further as that which, according to Carl Schmitt, is without exteriority. From this perspective, the sovereign act “emanates from nothingness,”¹⁹ an aspect that in the context of the Soviet Union entitled Stalin to enforce, rework, and rewrite ideology as the official language guiding the entire society to great victories achieved through utter and continuous transformations. Working in committees like the Repertoire Committee that followed Stalin’s dictates, censors like Savva Lukich lampooned in Bulgakov’s *The Crimson Island* acted like social engineers who served as instruments to construct a communist society. The work of a great number of committees provided positive censorship to the citizenship through ideological immersion emanating from radio, Stalin’s addresses, propaganda films, party addresses, and so on.

Vigilance was also ensured through committee work that informed on everyone and probed suspected people’s consciences, thereby exposing a suspect’s most inward thoughts. Zealotry was an indispensable weapon for rooting counterrevolutionary zealots—or those falling out of grace with Stalin. Interrogators dispatched from the ranks of the committees spared nothing in the extraction of confessions and the recording of admissions of guilt signed by the accused. There was also the self-criticism procedure that was promoted as a way to discourage recalcitrant citizens whose shortcomings were discovered in hostile halls, during endless hours of procedures designed to determine arrest, expulsion from the Party, or reprimand.

Progressing from one horrific stage to another, Vişniec’s play triggers forms of ethical engagement that have the power to collapse boundaries, both geographic and temporal, as Meyerhold, who is engaged in the fictional process of staging Shakespeare’s famous tragedy, traverses the whole range of Stalinist censorship, interrogations, torture, and execution—from the

¹⁷ See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁸ Paul Hirst, “Carl Schmitt’s Decisionism,” in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Verso, 1999), 11.

¹⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 2.

objections of the state spies who censor each and every directorial decision to the director's interrogation and suffering in prison, culminating in the sound of the typewriter which, in the final scene, is clacking like an invisible machine gun firing at its victim. The depiction of trauma evident in Meyerhold's cuts and bruises, his blood-soaked shirt, and his suffering in prison, intertwined with the phantasmagoric visits of the Generalissimo whose pipe identifies him with Stalin, divert attention from the personal to the political, lending added force to the impact of state violence and Stalinist tactics. On stage, these representations elicit forms of participation from audiences contemporary with Vişniec, for whom such political events, after forty-five years of enforced Stalinism in Central and Eastern Europe, cannot be distant, abstract, or confined to the past. Thus, Vişniec's play not only depicts trauma but also reproduces it on stage, engaging the audience to be witnesses, through theatrical performance, to the horrors of Stalin's Soviet Union and to the absolutism of Stalin's sovereignty familiar to the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe.

Showing a perfect synchronization with the Shakespearean protagonist who was both a monster and a master of disarming fluency (as in his wooing of Lady Anne, when his eloquence proves to be the real act of penetration), Meyerhold attempts to suggest in his Richard a figure at once repellent and fantastic, a shock and a wonder whose hideous mystery acts like a magnet. Underlying Meyerhold's increasing fascination with and growing closeness to Richard is the director's realization that the monstrosity of the Shakespearean protagonist is not ideologically motivated, that it lacks the Stalinist partocracy that was a form of secular theocracy ruling in the name of the Stalinist Idea.

To Richard's wonder, "Tell me, comrade Vsevolod, why do you make me into a sympathetic character. No one has ever made Richard III a sympathetic character. I am altogether an assassin, a murderer, cruel, unscrupulous. So why try to disguise me with this gloss of serenity and compassion," Meyerhold replies simply, "Because you represent evil with no ideology attached." Unlike Richard III, who is pure evil but lacks an ideocratic purpose, Stalin and the Man of Steel come together as a monstrous entity that summons more vituperation than Shakespeare's "hunch-backed toad" ever could.

Captured through the play's reconstructive lens, Stalin makes an early stage appearance as the Generalissimo who praises Meyerhold's drama-

tization of Gogol's play that had been staged to great acclaim in the Soviet Union ten years earlier and encourages him to persist in being "the incorruptible might of the nation." The broader context of Meyerhold's trauma—his terror at the sight of the Generalissimo and fear that the commission will delay "giving him the green light" to continue with the staging of Shakespeare's *Richard III*—takes centerstage and complicates the director's psychological torment precisely because of his being perceived nationally as a threat to the state's social and political structures.

Gradually, Meyerhold's growing affinity with Shakespeare's Richard III, a character who functions both as a critique and as an ambivalent celebration of a free and unruly spirit carrying on his own battles in a system that finds itself in a state of collapse, turns Meyerhold to a certain degree into Richard III's cultural paradigm, a transformation suggested when the director has the hunchback and the armor that identify the Shakespearean protagonist symbolically removed from the actor playing Richard III on stage. In his clear connectivity with Richard III, who is featured not only as an actor playing Richard III but also as a real character, the once acclaimed director, who in Višniec's play is trapped in Stalin's destruction of Russia's cultural tradition, seems to be echoing the Shakespearean protagonist as an exemplar of "inner life magnificently tortured." In the context of Višniec's politically charged play, the Shakespearean Richard III who laments the decline of the "old discipline of Englande" may well seem like a faint echo of Meyerhold's own regrets over the demise of old Russia and the Bolsheviks' triumph, a process in which Meyerhold had played a major part as an enthusiastic, albeit sadly self-deceived, agent of cultural change.

Even before the Soviet Union came into being, Meyerhold wished to face the changes of modernity in Bolshevik Russia without destroying the specificity of his artistic sensibility that defined his genius. The son of a Lutheran vodka distillery owner and a convert to Russian Orthodoxy, he had become one of the stars of the Moscow Art Theatre, from the moment of its inception in 1898, when Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko had founded it. But after an argument with Stanislavsky, he left to become a leader of the Symbolist Theatre and in 1908 became director of the Imperial theaters, the Aleksandrinsky and Mariinsky, only to perform an even more unexpected switch in 1918, when he joined the Bolshevik party.

For Meyerhold, as for other great artists like Babel, Eisenstein, or Ehrenburg, modernity was the whirlwind of revolution, with its promise of modernization. His great admiration for Chekhov (who was initially a sort of surrogate father) and Gogol shows that he identified with the old Russian culture. His support of Lenin in the early days of the Bolshevik Revolution and his commitment to its success are evident in his numerous public engagements. But by the time of Meyerhold's imprisonment, the élan of the revolution had been replaced by the ever-changing metaphors and symbolic devices of an ideology Stalin was using as a self-propelled device for his will to power, official memoranda, file numbers, provisions of the criminal code, and the various forms of a vast administration of terror which swept the country clean in the purges of the late 1930s. It was a monstrously deformed reality and indefensible strategic fabrications in which the Soviet people lived the slow and terrifying unfolding of their lives, and in which Meyerhold could not exist.

Meyerhold's putative directions in the staging of *Richard III* are disjointed and adapted to complement the play's language of trauma. As he creates scenes and situations that duplicate the ordeals of the Stalinist world, the director is constantly interrupted and forced to modify his vision to suit the constant surveillance of state censorship, even after the completion of five reviews by the Commission of Culture and Propaganda, an entity that reinforces the politically imposed ideology. Ever vigilant, the censorship, which also enlists the help of Meyerhold's immediate family, represents "the eye of the Party" prepared to expose Meyerhold's "artistic style riddled with allusion." Such an instance occurs when the soldiers fallen on the battlefield appear to Meyerhold's father, grotesquely featured in the play as a volunteer in the Service of Demining Undermining Ideologies, to be not the corpses of the Shakespearean original but rather victims of mass executions. Taking precautions against such a possible confusion, not at all unreasonable given Stalin's ongoing terror that was exterminating more victims than the medieval plague, Meyerhold's fictional father suggests sticking arrows, about four in each body lying on the stage, in order to eliminate suspicion of a newly open mass grave.

As the play's fragmented scenes reveal in moving abruptly from Meyerhold's wife to his mother, father, and sinister newborn baby, the director is humiliated and forced to fight in endless rounds of self-criticism the

grotesque accusations that are brought up by the Voice of Self-Censure, which articulates communist ideology in the public space. First, the director has to acknowledge that “the interior of his head is not a private space but the property of the working classes”²⁰ since, as the Voice of the Self-Censure declares, “in our state private property has been abolished.” His self-criticism, which entails a long process of admissions and retractions of his artistic decisions, begins with the acknowledgment that:

In this production [of *Richard III*] which has just been viewed by the Commission of the Minister of Culture and Propaganda for the purpose of obtaining the permission to perform and broadcast, the character of *Richard III* is more sympathetic and positive because he has eluded my revolutionary vigilance. Comrades, I make my self-criticism. The character *Richard III* has been much stronger than I. I fear I don't have the power to control his movements on the stage. But, in every way I can, let me thank you, comrades! Thank you for being in my head! It makes me happy to have you in my head. Thank you for watching over me ... Thank you, thank you.²¹

Suggesting the trauma of Meyerhold's real life experiences, such as the tragedy of his wife's brutal murder by a never-identified killer, who had left seventeen knife wounds in her body before it was found in the couple's apartment soon after the director's arrest, Meyerhold's fictional wife, mother, father, and baby are featured in Vişniec's play as terrifying, spectral visions that bring to the stage grotesque impersonations of the director's family shaped into the mold of the Stalinist state's aberrations. Thus, the director's mother acts as an envoy of the Detection of Malevolent Modernization and Contemporization Service, who asks Meyerhold why he did not choose to direct a fun play like *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play that would have kept him out of trouble with the Agency for the Investigation of Allusions, of which she is a retired volunteer. Vişniec's irony touches here on the Soviet literary iconography that held Shakespeare's plays in high regard, but only selectively. A play like *The Taming of the Shrew* would

²⁰ Vişniec, *Richard III*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

be a fine piece for censorship, corresponding to the Soviet notion of "world literature" that was at the core of the Stalinist cosmopolitanism imposed in the 1930s with the intention of reaching national aggrandizement through culture. Literature, theatrical repertoire included, had a purely instrumental role in synthesizing the value system and working out a code of values and behavior that met the criteria and mission of the Soviet purveyors and legislators of culture acting unilaterally under Stalin's stewardship. Finally, Meyerhold's screaming baby comes out of his mother's womb, summing up all accusations and conspiratorial charges against the bewildered director, the cacacomrade, before he is arrested and beaten:

Shut your face, you piece of reactionary garbage ... Papa, do you believe the political police don't know how to read between the lines of your corrupt production? Look our agents have had to read all of Shakespeare because of you! Why don't you put on "The Merry Wives of Windsor"? It's nice and fun ... Our people need to enjoy themselves ... And you, instead of trying to divert our citizens a bit, who return home from work tired and exhausted, you work them all up and incite them to sabotage ... Here is your dossier cacacomrade. You have been under observation for 10 years, 15 years, 20 years ... You are a member of a group that calls together all the counter-revolutionary elements of the artistic domain. You are leading a subversive effort destined to weaken the State and sabotage the effort to create the New Man. That makes us really sick, here in the Section of Art and Beauty of the Political Police, to see artists like you led astray by such spiteful, ideological doubt. Show us a Richard III at the service of the New Man, of the working class, of our scientific ideology ... Come on, coraggio, comrade, Daddy.²²

Ultimately, Vişniec's sketchy portrayal of all these characters appears to intentionally marginalize the personal in order to focus on the political as a lens through which the play can be contextualized and interpreted. After all, *Richard III-Meyerhold*'s emphasis is on the political, on the prominence of Stalinism and its criminal activities, which are at the center of Vişniec play. Meyerhold's fate—the harassment, censorship, arrest, suffering, con-

²² Ibid., 43–5.

viction, and execution—demonstrate how the system attacked the director's essence, his consciousness, and his identity through the generating power of Stalinist ideology and signification. In the end, officially, Vsevolod Meyerhold no longer existed as Vsevolod Meyerhold, hence Vişniec's dramatic enactment of Meyerhold's fictional duel with his own nonexistence at the border of absurdity and madness that was Stalin's Russia at the moment when grand ideology turns into everyday world and the visions of an all-encompassing ideology turn into bodies.

Juxtaposing Stalin's demonic heartlessness with Richard's destruction of human lives in the Shakespearean classic—his nine murders, six of them on stage, committed by the various grisly means of stabbing, drowning, and even beheading—Vişniec duplicates in his own play Stalin's cruelty in the horrifying appearance of Richard III's head brought on stage by the Generalissimo on a covered plate. This scene, which Vişniec draws from the Shakespearean original that features the severed head of Lord Hastings produced for Richard's inspection, does not diminish the perception of Stalin's reign of terror. Like his Shakespearean counterpart, who simply cannot stop himself from killing—"I am in / So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin"²³—for Stalin too, to paraphrase once again Shakespeare's villain, "Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye."²⁴

Under Stalin's omnipresent murderous gaze, Meyerhold's murder resonates on an empty stage, with a typewriter echoing the invisible bullets of a firing squad.

Early on, in the beginning of Vişniec's play, the irony in the Generalissimo's praise of Meyerhold as a great artist reaches an insidious level when he encourages the naïve director to listen to his inner voice because "It is only the inner voice that speaks the truth."²⁵ The irony becomes even more sinister for the spectator aware that every period of Stalin's rule after Lenin's death in 1924 crystallized not only around an identifiable enemy—Trotsky, kulaks, urban wreckers, the "counterrevolutionaries" and "spies" of the 1930s, and so on—but also around the potential threat of people's inner thoughts. Stalin's famous toast on November 7, 1937, recorded in the "Diary" of Georgi Dimitrov, reminded all those who heard it at the time that

²³ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 4.2.63–4.

²⁴ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 4.2.65.

²⁵ Vişniec, *Richard III*, 6.

individual thoughts were a great enemy, an enemy that the state would fight and destroy. Surrounded by party enthusiasts and loyalists who were applauding approvingly, Stalin declared: "We will mercilessly destroy anyone who, by his deeds or these thoughts—yes, by his thoughts—threatens the unity of the socialist state. To the complete destruction of all enemies, themselves and their kin!"²⁶

As it had become clear to Stalin in the 1930s, Meyerhold had made his theater an ironic mask through which he could preserve the balance of his dual identity, his inner thoughts shielded by dramatic performance in which silence played a subversive part. Vişniec's play captures the director's ironic mask in *Richard III-Meyerhold* by having Meyerhold "speak" through his insistence on silence ... or the moments of silence that, according to the interrogators from the Section for the Screening of Suspicious Silence, "is troublesome for the working class" and communicates a form of putative guilt that Meyerhold is summoned to denounce once again through coerced self-criticism:

All speech is surrounded by the aura of silence. And this aura of silence represents a terrible gravitational force that captures the attention even more than the words themselves. And sometimes this aura of silence conveys the opposite of what the words seem to be saying... . And I humbly ask the help of the party to pick through my work and eliminate all suspicious moments of silence... . Comrades, I auto-accuse myself of heading an organization of deception that nourishes all the counter-revolutionary moments of silence in the domain of art... By my direction in silence I wanted to besmirch the reality of my country. The metaphors of my direction in silence unleashed a gas without odor which proliferated itself like a plague in the room. The images of silence that I created are veritable stink bombs thrown at the faces of the audience.²⁷

After his arrest, Meyerhold's silence became complete as he could no longer direct plays from prison. But to have left him in peace even then would have negated the political paranoia upon which Stalin operated, the charges he

²⁶ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov (1933–1949)*, ed. Ivo Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 65.

²⁷ Vişniec, *Richard III*, 49.

masterminded against those he wanted to murder under the guise of decrees of public proclamations. In Soviet Russia's sociopolitical deterioration, the accusation of being a spy in the service of foreign powers was a powerful crime. In Vişniec's play, Meyerhold's horrific newborn baby, who is greeted as "the new man," cries out the supreme invective against his father: "Enough, enough, enough! Comrade Papa caca, you don't have the right to pronounce the word 'Comrade.'" You are a spy in league with foreign powers."²⁸

Stalin's preferred accusation against those he perceived to be traitors was to call them spies and saboteurs, a convenient incrimination that enabled his political maneuvering and disposal of the disgraced individuals now seen as enemies of the state. Initially puzzling, Meyerhold's interrogators' insistence in Vişniec's play on Shakespeare—"this English author ... William Shakespeare ... And so, just so that everything should be perfectly clear, we asked our agency to send us the file on this author ... this English author ... And here it is ... and as we were looking through his file ... we found this mug shot"²⁹—begins to make sense in terms of Stalin's domestic purges and international engagement at the time of the Gide fiasco. Why is it condemnable that Meyerhold, in Vişniec's imagined staging of Richard III, chooses an English playwright? Why is this Englishness more incriminating evidence for spying than the reality of Meyerhold's German ethnic roots? In the retrospective perspective of Vişniec's play, the relevance of the international situation in the case of Stalin's Soviet Union becomes quite clear: the accusation against Meyerhold, or Babel, for spying on behalf of the British powers could now be used against any public suspicion that might have been raised about the advisability of the impending Hitler-Stalin Pact. The political nature of Meyerhold's arrest, just like that of Babel, who was also accused of spying and of having served as a puppet to the European imperialists from France and England as a follow-up to Gide's negative assessment of the Soviet Union, reflects the use and benefits of such accusations: They could advance Stalin's foreign policy by proving, through such vigilant unmasking of the spying, the validity of his intentions and the need to sign a pact of nonaggression with Hitler.

²⁸ Ibid., 113.

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

One can only assume that, under Stalin's orders, Meyerhold had to be found guilty, as in Vişniec's play, of having "rummaged in the rotten garbage heap of decadent theatre, his theatre a theatre of stench, wreaking with the stench of a reactionary, revengeful spirit."³⁰ In addition, he had to become a dangerous element vis-à-vis the international situation. In building such dramatic intricacies and suspense step by step, Vişniec's play suggests that Meyerhold stood for something that Stalin was masterminding and manipulating like a Generalissimo on a battlefield, making the director a part of a larger, destructive machine in a war waged against the Soviet state. As documents show, at the time of Meyerhold's arrest, trial, and execution, Stalin used several leading cultural figures like Babel as lightning rods and scapegoats in the Soviet positioning against the European imperialists from France and England.

Like nearly all Soviet proceedings, Meyerhold's interrogation and guilt were never made known publicly during the Soviet period. Such documentation was only for internal consumption by the government. In dramatizing the Soviet state's murderous tactics, Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* offers a moving enactment of and testimony to the crimes of the Stalinist social and political forces unleashed in the aftermath of the Soviet writers' engagement with the Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture that was headed by Malraux. In unmasking Stalin's "machine like no other," to quote the opening of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, a machine for killing that worked perfectly and whose purpose was to maintain normal appearances, Vişniec's *Richard III-Meyerhold* delivers a harrowing account of the murders and executions of the Great Terror that sucked the Soviet writers and artists into the funnel of Stalin's repressions. Through the art of theatrical representation, which raises the stakes to the highest point of dramatic representation in the emulation of a Shakespearean classic in order to produce an imagined politically subversive dramatization, *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* brings to the stage the grotesque and terrifying dimensions of Stalinist criminal terror and its climate of fear.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

V.

Staging *Hamlet* as Political No Exit in Géza Bereményi's *Halmi*

Géza Bereményi's *Halmi* belongs to a long list of stagings of *Hamlet* in communist Central and Eastern Europe that mark a sustained theatrical effort to make up for the time when the play was banned in the USSR on Stalin's orders, from 1924 until his death in 1953. Even though they were not tantamount to dissent or intended to bring down these countries' communist governments, *Hamlet*-based productions like *Halmi* scored small victories against censorship by restoring centrality and complexity to the Shakespearean classic in the context of an ideologically claustrophobic Soviet bloc.³¹ In her preface to European *Hamlet* rewritings, Ruth J. Owen references Jonathan Kalb's point on using *Hamlet* as a symbol for the modern intellectual's hesitations in the face of tyranny as an Eastern European tendency, and states that the "Hamlets of Europe have developed their own referential and semantic universes, such that new meanings have emerged from the re-encounters between Shakespeare and the linguistically diverse cultures of Europe."³²

³¹ Among the publications addressing the idea of appropriating *Hamlet* in various Eastern and Central European contexts, see Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001); Gibinska and Romanowska-Kowalska, *Shakespeare in Europe*; Gibinska and Limon, *Hamlet East-West*; Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also consider the extensive scholarship on the historical context of Hungarian *Hamlet* versions conducted by Márta Minier, and the work of Nicoleta Cinpoș regarding Romanian *Hamlets*. For a focus beyond *Hamlet*, but firmly grounded in the view that Shakespeare is a European author par excellence see Dirk Delabastita, Jozef de Vos, and Paul Franssen, eds., *Shakespeare and European Politics* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008).

³² Owen, *Hamlet Zone*, 2.

In the political context of a communist Europe, *Halmi* can also be seen as a grotesque, or absurd, paraphrases of other theatrical masterpieces like Sartre's *No Exit* or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, whose unforgettable characters' damnation and doomed waiting share an underlying political impasse that can be understood to describe the self-betraying symptoms of the playwrights' political milieu—a disillusioned post-World War II Europe and the dramatists' self-censoring awareness of its condition.

Echoing *Hamlet*, both the classical model and its parodies, like the anonymous *Hamlet! The Raving Prince of Denmark* (1866), Bereményi's *Halmi* displays dramatic contours similar to Sartre's *No Exit*, a play that unfolds in the same room where three characters have been brought together for all eternity to act as each other's torturers. In the same fashion, Bereményi's play is set in the dramatic present of the playwright's contemporary Hungary, in the space of a claustrophobic Budapest, whose inhabitants confirm Sartre's ineluctable adage in *No Exit* that "hell is—other people." Caught in a vicious tangle, Bereményi's characters tumble into destructive relationships and trigger the disintegration of social and familial structures.

Compared to Sartre's dry staging of the human condition, which forces us to stand trial at all times and depend on the judgment of others while trapped in the infernal tortures of living in *No Exit*, Bereményi envisions his characters' neighborhood and homes as both a site for the psychologically tormented Halmi and a shabby and no less hellish mausoleum of the proletariat of the 1960s Hungary. The phantasmagoric, politically tainted setting is used to indict through Halmi, the Hamlet-like young protagonist, the decade's flawed intellectual pursuits, as well as the questionable decisions of the previous generations (Halmi's parents and teacher) that have collectively plunged one half of Europe into war, occupation, devastation and the ultimate brute force of Stalinism.

As a remarkable reimagining of the Shakespearean classic in the Central and Eastern European theater, *Halmi* is also a pivotal rewrite of *Hamlet* in that it combines the gender studies and psychological approaches adopted in the modern critical discussions of the original play with radical political interpretations brought to the stage in the space of the communist and postcommunist countries. Hamlet's well-known line, "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," runs its course throughout Bereményi's play, as young Halmi attempts to negotiate with his immediate

family how he is to fulfill his quest for adult male sexuality and moral responsibility.

In presenting Halmi's mother and the young Lili, Halmi's adoring and slightly psychotic female pursuer, as recipients of the young man's misogynist revulsion toward the entire sex, Bereményi's Halmi becomes a showpiece for landmarks in gender studies in the postmodern era like Coppelia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (1981), Marjorie Garber's *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (1981), or Jane Adelman's "Man and Wife is One Flesh: *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body" (1992), which take a careful look at the hazards of young males in their struggle to achieve a difficult type of self-understanding, complicated by a mother's sexual disloyalty to the father. Like Gertrude, Halmi's adulterous mother provokes a sense of shame in her son for being the offspring of a cuckolded husband. In a similar dramatic analogy and comparable context to the one Adelman examines in *Hamlet*, Halmi's incomprehensively confused and sexually liable would-be girlfriend Lili, appears like a lost, modern Ophelia. In accordance with Adelman's views, *Halmi* is thus a play that "conflates [much like the Shakespearean original] the putative beloved with the betraying mother, undoing the strategies that enabled marriage."³³

Halmi's problematic sexuality and his inability to restore a sense of morality to his personal and family life, resonate with Bereményi's dramatic reflection on the inability of the young generation to survive the brutality of communist ideology and on the sham of guaranteed psychological fulfillment in one's personal and family life invoked among the other empty promises of communism. Conversely, Halmi offers testimony to Hungary's inability to escape the political affinities with its hated Russian neighbor that was holding the lands of the Soviet bloc in its tight grip at the time of the play's enactment in 1979. In this context, the narrowly circumscribed space of the Hungarian capital where Halmi's family lives suggests a dramatic representation of staged-captivity by which to protest the USSR's control of Hungary, one of the lands behind the Iron Curtain, as a political prisoner. Halmi's family is thus an expression of what Czesław Miłosz, in

³³ Adelman's seminal essay, which marks the meeting point of psychological and feminist criticism, is included in Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers; Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Play, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 14.

a different context, sees as “passivity, shiftlessness and defeatism in the face of destiny,”³⁴ by which he means the unfortunate geographic affiliation and unfavorable cross-breeding that had forced the countries in Central and Eastern Europe to revel in the unhealthy political and cultural practices imported from the pernicious Russian social and cultural influence during the communist era. Thus Halmi can be perceived as the heir of a national heritage held hostage in Bereményi’s contemporary Hungary by the Soviets’ imposed communist regime and political and cultural takeover.

Sadly for Halmi, his moral deterioration and hollow nature amount to what Derrida perceives in a different context as a “waiting without a horizon of expectation for the future so bedeviled by uncertainties.”³⁵ In a contemporary political analogy with the time of Bereményi’s writing of *Halmi*, to the question of “Whither Marxism?” which Derrida voices in his book, the answer is the same for Halmi as it might have been for Hamlet: the play’s indeterminacy of meaning and moral purpose leads audiences and readers of *Hamlet* and *Halmi* to find questions rather than answers, the triumph of death over life, and an endemic moral paralysis.

The lack of answers in addressing the absence of meaning in the worlds of the two protagonists, be it Hamlet’s Denmark or Halmi’s communist Hungary, may be resolved through the direction in today’s modern literary theory that considers Hamlet’s skepticism and anxiety as an unanswerable complex binary of life and death and Halmi’s defeatism and amorality as merely absurd. I believe, however, that an additional, enriching dimension to these views can be added in relation to the two plays and protagonists. Through Hamlet’s questions, Shakespeare gives the play a window into European modernity that allows for further stagings of *Hamlet* in modern surroundings; by contrast, through Halmi and his family in the roles of the new type of man and the new type of society of communist Hungary, Bereményi gives *Halmi* a room with a view inside the Soviet-type of interior, claustrophobic, associated with aggressive, intimidating, demoralizing, and ultimately murderous characteristics. Using the language of political theater,

³⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 57.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Bereményi stages in *Halmi* a way to deal with the dead-ended absurdist and destructive practices of communism.³⁶

Such a way stages in Bereményi's *Halmi* the tragic consequences of Hungary's communism on the country's young generation through an ingenious adaptation of *Hamlet*. The brutal cruelty of *Halmi*, the young protagonist who always shuns moral norms, shrouds Bereményi's clever dramatization of Soviet aggressiveness and disrespect for human life, echoing Joseph Brodsky's comments that cast communists as "creatures who by all human accounts should be considered degenerates."³⁷ To make the Hungarians' despair in the face of such human evil comprehensible and more accessible to the Western audience, Bereményi's projection of life in the Soviet bloc resonates in *Halmi* with dramatic allusions to the hopelessness, wasting, shrinking, and fading away of man that Didi's and Gogo's cruel games and Lucky's tortuous monologue articulate in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Outplaying the despair of Beckett's universal tramps and of Hamlet's impotence in the face of his uncle's shameless rule and an unpredictable future, the reductive effect of communism on the human psyche is unique enough to make *Halmi* a reflection of the new society and the new type of man Stalinism has created. Unexpectedly and morbidly, in Bereményi's play two clowns make sudden and intrusive appearances on stage. Although they seem to be disconnected from the other characters, the two clowns are useful in times of crisis and death, triggering a bitter satirical undertone throughout the entire play and strengthening the cruel and at the same time laughable absurdity of *Halmi*'s world by disposing of corpses in a rather humorous way. This appears to be the only kind of entertainment afforded in Stalinism.

Much in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* relates to his madness, and the latter's duality as feigned or real. As the Prince of Denmark struggles to understand

³⁶ For a parallel reading of *Halmi* as a take on the failed revolution in Hungary, see Veronika Schandl, "History Interrupted: Hamlet and 1956 in Hungary," in Owen, *Hamlet Zone*, 105–115, previously published as "'What Must I Set Right?'—Géza Bereményi's *Halmi* or the Prodigal Son," *Folio—Journal of the Shakespeare Society of the Low Countries* 12, no. 2 (2005): 25–38. Schandl draws on the clash between generations, and explores the play in terms of experiences of exile and inner emigration.

³⁷ Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 32.

his situation and make choices, madness appears to be both an expression of his torment and a useful device in his desire for revenge—a duality that had led Meyerhold to consider a would-be staging of *Hamlet* with two different characters playing the unhappy Prince. Unlike Ophelia, who has in fact gone mad, Hamlet's show of madness reflects the protagonist's disgust with the situation in which he finds himself, particularly in relation to Claudius and his marriage to Hamlet's mother, on the one hand, and his thwarted attempts to bring light into his father's death, on the other.

In Shakespeare's play the queen's hasty marriage to Claudius, her former brother-in-law, and the usurped throne of Denmark are the ostensible reasons for Hamlet's erratic behavior and brutal treatment of Gertrude and innocent Ophelia. Transferred to our world, Hamlet's revulsion over his mother's and uncle's questionable morality and his powerless anger over the poisonous political takeover of Denmark make Hamlet appear modern, even postmodern, in the sense of presenting him as a dispossessed and deeply conflicted hero, traumatized by the legacy left by his parents' generation. The legacy is that of a world without values, with uncertainty and mistrust advancing in their place—a world not much different from post-World War II Central and Eastern Europe, crushed under the Soviet tanks after the war ended in May, 1945.

That part of Europe, which also included Hungary, was separated from the Western part of the continent by what Winston Churchill in March 1946 called an Iron Curtain behind which the Soviet Union had installed itself, with Stalin at the helm. More disappointment followed for the dispossessed peoples of Central and Eastern Europe fallen under Stalinism. The cultural climate became particularly bleak, especially because it had already taken a downturn in the Soviet Union where Konstantin Simonov, the critic considered a Westernizer and credited with the dismantling of the socialist realism, had initiated a new nationalist and anti-American trend for culture with the publication of his novel *Smoke of the Fatherland* in 1947.

That same year, in tandem with the anti-Western atmosphere of the Soviet bloc, the conservative paranoia instituted in the United States led to the blacklisting of the Hollywood intellectuals and to President Harry Truman's speech that announced the Cold War and the new political order of a world divided between democratic and totalitarian states. Adding to the general confusion, he also told a joint session of Congress that it would be the policy

of the United States “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”³⁸ But this promise had no effect when protests in Hungary in 1956 turned into a full scale revolution, and when the Soviet-backed government was overthrown. The Red Army invaded, more than 2,000 Hungarians were killed, 200,000 fled the country, and the leader of the new government, the reform-minded communist Imre Nagy whose short-lived government included the prominent Georg Lukacs, was arrested, tried in secret, and hanged as an example to others.

The Hungarian revolutionaries’ hope for help from the West did not materialize as help never came. The American government assured the Kremlin that it had no national interest at stake in Hungary. And when some people complained that Radio Free Europe had been urging Hungarians to resist Soviet domination for years, President Dwight Eisenhower pointed out that the United States had never advocated *violent* resistance.

In this context, it is not counterintuitive to suggest, as Tony Judt claims, that:

The revival of cultural and political self-consciousness in these lands ... had a depressingly contrasting effect in the West. In fact, they served further to remove Central Europe from the attention of Western intellectuals by rendering it progressively less relevant to their concerns. Just as in 1950 the other half of Europe had been treated simply as a reflection of the Soviet Union, so the latter’s fall from grace (in part as a result of its actions in the region) dragged Central Europe itself away from the focus of attention. By the early 1970s, following the emergence of Gierek in Poland and Husák in Czechoslovakia, and with the “independent” policies of Kádár and Ceaușescu (in Hungary and Romania, respectively) Central and Eastern Europe appeared once again to be stable; the events of the 1960s had been followed by “normalization,” and interest, such as it was, had dissipated.³⁹

³⁸ This statement became known as the Truman Doctrine. See Ivan T. Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 34.

³⁹ Tony Judt, “The Rediscovery of Central Europe,” in *Eastern Europe ... Central Europe ... Europe*, ed. S.R. Graubard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

Born in 1946, Bereményi was a witness to most of these events, and to the subsequent Stalinist order that engulfed Hungary and its people. Based on Order 00135 of the Soviet Military Administration in 1945, people suspected of being “spies, saboteurs, terrorists, activists of the Nazi party” as well as ordinary people deemed dangerous, were arrested. This edict made it possible to arrest almost everyone, whether or not a Nazi or collaborator—it could in fact be stretched to include anyone whom the Stalinist regime disliked or wished to exterminate.⁴⁰ To reinforce the new Kremlin dictates and to scare the countries of the Soviet bloc into compliance, Stalin ordered a massive wave of arrests in 1948 and 1949, a time bearing great resemblance to the Great Terror of 1937–38. Further, even after the majority of political prisoners arrested in the postwar period were released from the Gulag following Stalin’s death, many remained in prisons until well into the 1960s. The pace of de-Stalinization was once again spearheaded by culture.

Having miraculously escaped the Stalinist repressions, Ehrenburg published the influential *Thaw* in 1954, which argues for a less paranoid attitude toward contacts with Westerners. The book, which gave the Khrushchev’s thaws their name, led a resurgence in the cultural relations with the West, in spite of the suppressed Hungarian uprising, with books like Hemingway’s novels and the songs of the Beatles reaching an impressive level of popularity among the young in the late 1960s and early 1970s when new authors like Bereményi were coming of age in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. The new fraternizing atmosphere of the Soviet bloc with the West, which had reached a dangerous point in the brief moment from 1975 to 1977 when it seemed possible that the communists of France, Italy, and Spain would forge a renewed, democratic communist movement in the West, came to an abrupt halt with the so-called stagnation of the Brezhnev era. The young generation’s sense of cultural internationalism seemed no longer accessible as the pressing pace of de-Stalinization was violently halted and reversed.

The protagonist of his 1979 play *Halmi* is a troubled youth, angry with his parents, classmates, and school officials, and completely void of feelings. Beyond its immediate appearance of a spelled out *Hamletmachine*, Heiner

⁴⁰ For a detailed examination of this episode, see Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 88–115.

Müller's 1977 play produced two years earlier in Paris, Bereményi's own play features in Halmi a character that Margreta de Grazia, in *Hamlet without Hamlet*, identifies as a modern protagonist whose actions, in the political context of communist Europe, could be perceived, as mentioned earlier, as a "waiting without horizon of expectation" analogy addressed to Derrida's question of "Whither Marxism?" in *Specters of Marx*.

In the context of this variegated pattern, the American intellectual influences of the early 1970s, when the cultural trend of Central and Eastern Europe was to get *into* America or at least maintain a dialogue with the West through reformatted classical works of literature and of the theater, were subversively maintained as a way of resisting suffocating subjugation by the Moscow-imposed political regimes of the Soviet bloc. Moreover, by adapting the political crimes and horrifying tactics of totalitarianism to the classical theater (with Shakespeare a favorite), dramatists like Bereményi could reveal in their plays their own country's traumatic history and the unbearable present of a system of close political monitoring by Moscow. Further, the solidified carceral space of Soviet-enforced communism in the countries of the Stalinist bloc after the construction of the wall that encircled West Berlin in 1961, which could be said, from a Central and Eastern European perspective, to have been dramatically captured in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, became an iconic play for the ninety million inhabitants trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Central and Eastern Europe of which Bereményi's Hungary was a part, had become a dungeon or a hellish space where the people were entangled prisoners, hopelessly waiting to be saved by the West from the totalitarian net of lies and aberrant ideology woven by militarily enforced communism. The Soviets were allowed to have their way in the region, a state of affairs that was generally officially ignored. Like an absent Godot, the West was indifferent at best. In 1976, on public television, President Gerald Ford, who had been in Washington for twenty-seven years, claimed, in a debate with Jimmy Carter, that there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and that in Bucharest—which Ford had visited in 1975 following Romanian president Ceaușescu's invitation—people were dancing in the streets.

In the political prison of Bereményi's play, which is Hungary of the 1970s, Halmi behaves as if "he isn't all there," although his high school friend Horváth claims that Halmi "just pretends to be crazy so they'll

leave him alone.”⁴¹ “They” are Halmi’s overprotective and drunkard mother, who thinks that her son’s strange behavior stems from his erotic entanglement with a mentally unstable young woman named Lili, his wealthy stepfather, who is also the brother of Halmi’s biological father, and his old teacher, Pilisi, who is worried about his daughter Lili’s mad love for and pursuit of Halmi. Taking advantage of the girl’s innocence, Halmi orchestrates the young woman’s rape by two of his classmates, causes his biological father to throw himself in front of a bus when the latter, after having left Hungary in 1956, returns to Budapest to meet his son, and delights in keeping secret his mother’s sleeping pills overdose long enough to make sure that she cannot be saved by her husband, Halmi’s stepfather who is also his uncle.

The play’s traumatic events and the tortured protagonist punctuate dramatically a sense of betrayal and despair, the feelings that Hungarians in Bereményi’s generation must have grown up with after the 1956 revolt against the Soviet-backed government when no help arrived from the West. Disguising this political background into a fragmented and senseless world that proposes a grotesque literalization of crossover theater, Bereményi’s dramatic approach mingles a modern version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and an ingenious adaptation of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* acted out in his contemporary Hungary with a dialogue and cast that echo both models.

Reining the theatrical-cum-political matrices into the spectators’ understanding, *Halmi* is a distinctive play charged with the contingences and exigencies of the Cold War time, despite the fact that Bereményi’s characters are anchored in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* through names that makes them reducible to the classical model from the start. Disguised as a modern day Claudius, Halmi’s stepfather is an executive named Kondor (K is Hungarian for C) who also hold an important position in the Party. Always aggressive and mostly drunk, Halmi’s mother is just Mother, a character deliberately constructed as an underdeveloped feminine subjectivity to suggest communism’s patriarchal structures that gave the lie to the promises of gender equality. Other characters include Kondor’s subordinates,

⁴¹ Géza Bereményi, “*Halmi*, or the Prodigal Son,” in *Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays*, ed. Albert Tezla (London and Boston: Forest Books, 1992), 62. All quotations are from this translation/edition of the play.

appropriately named Rozner and Gyimesi, to echo with macabre humor the sinister Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Bereményi's play with the Shakespearean originals reiterates the confusion of the two in Gertrude's address, which is duplicated humorously by Halmi's mother who is, like Gertrude, unable to keep their identity straight. Polonius's counterpart appears in the guise of a wise but ineffective Pilisi, whose son is the diligent student Levente (a variation on Laertes) and whose daughter Lili (short for Kornélia) suffers unspeakable indignities on Halmi's orders. A notable exception to Bereményi's careful naming of his characters to suggest their Shakespearean counterpart by their first initial, Lili suggests Cordelia, another wronged Shakespearean female character whose name is close to Kornélia, as an alternative for *Hamlet's* tragic and sweet Ophelia. Completing the list are Halmi's classmates, Horváth (a dead ringer for Horatio) and Foglyos (a malevolent Fortinbras), and a messenger named Raynak, whose reporting duties in *Halmi* recommend him as a Hungarian Reynaldo, Polonius's servant sent to France to spy on Laertes.

Like Halmi's mother, his biological father has no name and no subjectivity. Fearing to be seen in broad daylight and sending others to search for Halmi, the son he had abandoned at birth by fleeing the occupied Hungary to seek political exile in America, this Father makes only two ghostly appearances before killing himself. In an interesting twist added to *Halmi*, there is a Madman played by the same actor who is the Father. At the play's end, he chokes Halmi to death before being taken away by the two clowns, whose occasionally quarreling pairdom and seemingly disconnected solicitude in the desolate emptiness of human relations bring to mind the Didi-Gogo and Lucky-Pozzo duets.

Halmi's action simultaneously affirms and denies the opening line and the closing stage direction of *Waiting for Godot*. "Nothing to be done" suggests the futility of hope in communism, the fixity of Hungary's rigid totalitarian system, and the political fluctuations of intellectual life in Central and Eastern Europe during the Soviet regime. In his murderous pursuits that echo Stalin's killings of innocent victims, the Madman suggests a dramatic denunciation of Soviet communism as a desperate entrapment in Madness, unmasked in Bereményi's play through the grotesque retro-fitting, neither imitative nor straightforward, of human relations and human living corresponding to checkered cultural practices, from an embrace of

the Western artistic scene to Stalinist paranoia no longer informed by world culture pursuits and a sense of internationalism. Resonating with the madness of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the hopeless waiting and despair of Beckett's doomed characters, the political scene of Central and Eastern Europe in general, and of Hungary in particular, extended from the periodical thaws in post-Stalinist Soviet Union, like the publication of Ehrenburg's *People, Years, Life* (1960–1965/1967) which portrayed, on the heels of the Hungarian uprising, not so bleak a picture of life in communism to the stagnation of Brezhnev's era that brought back the village prose and a resurrected nationalism of socialist realism.

Bereményi's play opens with Halmi's classmates informing him that a weird-looking old man wishes to see him in great secrecy. In the meantime, the old teacher Pilisi bids farewell to his second son, Levente, who has just been given permission to travel abroad through the intercession of Halmi's stepfather, Comrade Director Kondor. Between the lines, the audience is reminded of the difficulty of obtaining passports to travel outside the communist bloc for fear that those who leave would never return, like Pilisi's older son who defected and is now living in France, creating problems for his father and siblings left behind in Hungary. Levente's farewell to his sister Lili and then Pilisi's conversation with Lili are a clever reappropriation of the scene in *Hamlet* when Laertes parts with Ophelia before leaving for France, but not before cautioning her, at Polonius's request, to avoid any future meetings with Hamlet.

Although constructed in dramatic *vraisemblance* to the Shakespearean original, the farewell scene is in fact charged with political undertones, conveying the harsh conditions of life in communist Hungary, which the deceptive surface of Bereményi's play cleverly occludes. Thus, in parting with his son, Pilisi alludes to the difficulty of obtaining a passport and to the indignities he had to suffer "blow after blow" his entire life. Implied in this litany of sorrows is also the most recent setback caused by Pilisi's eldest son's defection from Hungary, a country which promoted, like all the other communist countries, a vitriolic nationalism and a great fear of Western Europe, dating back to Lenin and the communists' return of the capital to Moscow from St. Petersburg, which had been conceived by Peter the Great as a window onto Europe. Retreating to the country's interior in what Brodsky sees as a "womblike, claustrophobic and xenophobic

condition,⁴² the Soviet Union forced the same isolation from and perception of the West as a space of inhumanly exploitative capitalism and nightmarish consumerism.

Recognizable as an artful surrogate of the parting scene in *Hamlet*, the railroad station dialogue in *Halmi* brings to the stage a convincing facsimile of real life in post-1945 Hungary:

PILISI: It's almost time to leave. (*Embraces his son and makes the sign of the cross. While Pilisi is saying goodbye, Levente gets on the train, which soon begins to move, so Pilisi starts running along while saying goodbye.*) Don't forget that what I am saying to your brother also goes for the messenger. We must live here and nowhere else. We are Hungarian, and that means we have a debt we can never fully repay. But we must pay with installments; if we don't, this country and its credibility will be lost. If this doesn't mean anything to your brother, then remind him and yourself, son, how impossible my situation was, crawling in front of a nobody for him. For both of you. For a passport—in front of a nobody who hasn't even washed the blood off his hands. Don't forget your father, Levente, who received blow after blow for decades, who was stripped, evicted, left with nothing, but in spite of all this, sired three children in his old age, feeling it was his duty. Your mother died because of you. Come back to her!

LEVENTE: Don't get so upset, Father. Remember your heart. Goodbye... .

Lili, don't forget what I said.

LILI: It's right here, in my head; I feel that's a very good place.

LEVENTE: Goodbye. (*Disappears.*)

PILISI: What is it? What did he say to you?

LILI: He talked about the Halmi boy.

PILISI: I'm glad you reminded me. I don't want you to see him. Understand?

LILI: Yes, of course. (*They exit.*)⁴³

As *Halmi* arranges for Lili's cruel sexual encounter with his two classmates, Horváth and Foglyos, in his parents' house thus causing Pilisi's death of a heart attack, Lili's drowning in the Danube, and his mother's suicide, the

⁴² Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 82.

⁴³ Bereményi, *Halmi*, 85.

significance of his behavior is not just moral; it is expressly *political* in that the young protagonist is emblematic of communist Hungary's vicious nature and scope, predicated on the totalitarian state's moral evil—an echo in Bereményi's play of Stoppard's views on moral order in politics expressed in his 1974 interview with *Theatre Quarterly* mentioned in the introduction to this volume. For what makes Halmi wicked is not only the young man's utter immoral deeds. Nor is it merely the way his exceptionally privileged social status through his father's Party credentials puts him above the law commoners obey. It is the example he offers, an example that reveals the essential hollowness of the moral and legal order that masks the true character of the country's communist society.

Everything is rotten in Hungary. From start to finish, Bereményi's play suggests—and the audience grasps—that, beyond the specificity of the events, what was taking place on stage reflected the political situation of Hungary and its people. Returned from America to meet his biological son, Halmi's father gives an account of the widespread abuses and human suffering which communism made possible, and of how easily the totalitarian state could underwrite the very possibilities of decency and tolerable familial and social coexistence:

I thought a new world was beginning in '56. I fought, and after the collapse, I stayed in Hungary only because of your mother. I loved her deeply. In '57 they sentenced me to a long prison term; her present husband, my brother, testified against me. Later she came to see me in prison, to talk things over. She cried and suggested that at work and everywhere else they thought it best if she divorced me. I didn't agree, so she didn't insist. I was let out earlier than expected, and we lived together one more year. But by then everything was strained between us. She asked for a passport to go to the West and she got it; she was already carrying you. She insisted she could no longer live here, she wanted to bring you into the world outside the country. I couldn't get a passport, so I left illegally; I hid under the roof of a train heading for Vienna... I didn't find her in Vienna. Instead, her letter arrived, and that's how I learned the truth. While I was in prison, my brother had an affair with her, but they didn't have an easy relationship. Your mother always weakened when she saw me. They decided to get rid of me quietly. My brother arranged for a

passport for your mother knowing that I would defect. If I had returned, they'd have imprisoned me again.⁴⁴

Pregnant with plot-generating and symbolic energies, the personification of Halmi's father's bare life resonates with what may have been many lives touched by the unspeakable inhumanity of communism. People were jailed for being perceived as threats to the regime and the lives of millions were controlled through a network of local elites, like Halmi's uncle, who implemented all the Party directives even against their own family members in exchange for personal privileges and a reasonable degree of social prominence. As Charles Maier explained in *Among Empires* (2006), this is how empires, the Soviet Union included, traditionally work: local elites like Halmi's stepfather are created that ape the manners and values of their counterparts in the metropole, the imperial city which was Moscow, the culturally and politically hegemonic capital of the Soviet bloc.

The declared enemy was the capitalist world, which could attack, as Stalinist theory said they would, the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. However, the rapid recovery of Western Europe after the war, the economic prosperity of the United States, and the worsening conditions of living in the communist bloc, became a problem for the Stalinist leaders who were increasingly terrified of the capitalist world that they were supposedly aiming to conquer. They began to regard with suspicion any citizen who traveled abroad and soon began to forbid people in the Soviet bloc from traveling to the West and thus literally seeing what the standard of living in the West really was. The only alternative left for people was to defect, like Halmi's father, with the understanding that one could never return home, or risk prison and even execution in doing so.

From a certain point of view, Stalinism boiled down to an attempt to make people become better communists by locking up or killing the ones who wouldn't. But even at the height of totalitarian control, at the end of the 1970s, there were forms of resistance practiced daily, such as those of theatrical performances which offered, through plays like Bereményi's *Halmi*, an open challenge to the fallacies of Stalinist ideology and the failures of the system.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 87.

Suggesting a ridiculous parody of human existence relocated in the communist space and played out as *commedia dell'arte*, Bereményi's play features two clowns, whose changing names, the common Tibor, Pista, or Feri, suggest the Hungarian national type and whose relationship with each other and within the play is infused with recognizable "Godot" techniques. In their first ludicrous appearance the two clowns' absurd dialogue functions like the exchanges between the Didi-Gogo couple in *Waiting for Godot*, with Tibor, the Second Clown, asking for the affection which the First Clown refuses to show:

FIRST CLOWN (*nervously withdrawing his arm*): Don't touch me, Tibor. If you don't mind. I'd rather you didn't touch me. I don't want to offend you. But you see, I can't stand being touched. I just don't like it.⁴⁵

Unwilling to accept this refusal, the Second Clown, who is an orphan, insists on the need for affection and solidarity because "A great deal has taken place." These are key words for the audience, relating to Hungary's purges in the criminal process of Stalinization that left most families without fathers and to the political, social, and economic structures of the communist state reshaped under dictates from Moscow. Gleaned from the two clowns' subsequent appearances, such changes have transformed Hungary into a rotting sewer—a locus in which the two clowns, dressed in appropriate gear, are diving, bubbling and struggling for breath in front of Comrade Kondor's house. The Second Clown's ludic philosophizing, "Something's rotten down there,"⁴⁶ channels the rot of Stalinism, which Bereményi's *Halmi* brings to the stage, through the emblematic memory of *Hamlet*'s Denmark.

Perceived from the harsh realities of the 1970s, communism appeared like an immutable present from which the countries of the Soviet bloc could not escape. In Bereményi's play, the two clowns appear and reappear, but they reappear changed each time, unaware of their previous presence, incarnating a time that has no memory of yesterday—much like Beckett's Lucky and Pozzo. In *Waiting for Godot*, to Vladimir, who still believes in yesterday, Pozzo responds "Don't question me! The blind have no notion

⁴⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 91.

of time.⁴⁷ Pozzo refuses to admit that he had previously seen the tramps that he was there yesterday. For Pozzo the only time is the present, which never ends, which is always beginning, and from which one cannot escape. In Bereményi's dramatic structure, the two clowns also function in a perpetual present, with communism seen as an immense void, a dark hole that requires filling, a shaft of emptiness in the shape of the corpses the clowns bring to or remove from the stage. Their dialogue, like that of all characters in *Halmi*, is laden with mechanical repetitions from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—from isolated pronouncements (Halmi to his father, "There are more things in heaven and earth than you can imagine,"⁴⁸ or "Time's out of joint,"⁴⁹ to his mother) to recycled dialogue lines like the exchange between Halmi and Lili:

LILI: How have you been since I last saw you?

HALMI: Thanks. Well! Well! Well! Do you know where your father is?

LILI: I think he's at home.

HALMI: I hear he locks you up; he should be locked up instead, so he can only play the fool in his own house.⁵⁰

Minted in echoes, the play conveys the illusion of progressing through a thick immutability, which is the quality of the characters' lives in communism. They are in a hollow from which they speak the stagnation that they live, the nothing-to-be-done. They are trapped, forced into an admission of progress and camaraderie, the red flags of Marxist-Leninist theory, suggested in the two clowns' parodic dialogue about advancement in their job as sewer divers, leadership values, and professional vision in communism:

FIRST CLOWN (*still in diving outfit, he climbs out of the sewer and helps his companion out*): Well, we're done here. Let's go back to the office, Feri. You did a great job there.

SECOND CLOWN: I tried, Mr. Sweetpong.

⁴⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1954), 55.

⁴⁸ Bereményi, *Halmi*, 86.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

FIRST CLOWN: Never fear when Sweetpong's here. I'm not buttoning up my lips; I'm going to tell those who haven't given you a raise for years.

SECOND CLOWN: Will you, really? They'd listen to you.

FIRST CLOWN: Never fear. Where are we, son? Same place? Have we been in a circle then?

SECOND CLOWN: Yes, we have. That's why we are in the same place.

FIRST CLOWN: Good, Feri; you're a real gem. I'm going to tell them about this, too, that when I don't know where we are, you always know, right away. They'll appreciate that a lot, because many of them hate me and will enjoy a laugh at my expense. They're certain to give you a raise out of sheer delight, thinking that it will hurt my feelings because you told me off and that really hurts me, but doesn't really, only I'm going to pretend then, they'll give you a raise.

SECOND CLOWN: Oh, Mr. Sweetpong—thank you very much.⁵¹

The tone of this exchange brings the political and the human zone on a bare surface. Throughout the play, the two clowns' dialogue and various appearances make their condition not only *à deux*, but also *à quatre*: they are both Vladimir and Estragon (announced in the Second Clown's need for tenderness, the rejection, and ultimately the two clowns' enduring togetherness) and Lucky and Pozzo (emissaries of all the destructive relationships amongst men who create harsh and meaningless gods of politically aberrant leaders like Stalin). In Bereményi's play the four beings, reshaped as the two clowns, are turning and returning in the prison-space of fixers, masquerades, and travesties that is communist Hungary. In this updated milieu, the two clowns come and go as if in a cage of time, they speak and forget, act as well-dressed passersby, sewer divers, hospital attendants, and corpse bearers. In recycled gestures and speeches they feel alive, even as they mourn the tragic death of Lili, whose recognizable sadness resonates in the First Clown's memory of the sweet girl's words after the death of her father, the old teacher Pilisi: "I can't help crying when I think of him being put into the cold ground. My brother must be told

⁵¹ Ibid., 96.

about it. Thank you for the good advice anyway, uncle. Good night, good night, good night.”⁵²

Theatrical distance saves Bereményi's play from Stalinist censorship and permits the audience to see and understand that the characters reveal a concentrated portrait of the Hungarian people's own misery, of the banality of evil in communism. They are people who endure the worst that can happen to them and to their country—the oppression of living in communism.

⁵² Ibid., 97.

VI.

Nedyalko Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago*: Reading Bulgaria's Communist Political Culture through Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

If Matéi Vişniec's dramatic enactment of Meyerhold's arrest, torture, and execution was modeled on a historical play of the classic repertoire to mark subversively the final chapter of Stalin's plan to crush the leading Soviet intellectual figures, Nedyalko Yordanov's play *The Murder of Gonzago* opens the stage for a dramatic representation of revolutionary violence ingeniously interwoven in the intricate plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to show the horrors of Stalinism in the USSR and communist Bulgaria.

Yordanov's unmediated understanding of revolutionary fervor and brutal killings stems from his knowledge of communism, forced on his native country after World War II, with the return to the country of Georgi Dimitrov, the Moscow-trained theoretician of Marxist-Leninism. In the epoch opened up by the Bolshevik Revolution, Dimitrov, who kept a detailed journal during his exile in the Soviet Union, took his dictates from Stalin and linked his entire life with the ideas of a crude Marxism-Leninism. As early as 1923, the year when the Writers Union was formed by decree and socialist realism was introduced in the Soviet Union, Dimitrov, who was a leader of the local Comintern in Germany, spoke in the context of the Soviet success and the hope for the proletariat: "Today," he declared, "there exists a powerful Soviet Russia—the first worker-peasant state, a solid granite bulwark of peace; a source of strength, confidence and inspiration for the proletariat in all countries in its liberation struggle, a lode star of all working mankind."⁵³ After the suppression of the September 1923 Uprising in Bulgaria, Dimitrov emigrated from the country and spent a considerable amount of his time in exile in the Soviet Union, a country he called "the

⁵³ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. VII (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 63.

homeland of the world proletariat that brings together within a concentrating centre all the revolutionary forces in the world, the mainstay of the world proletarian revolution.”⁵⁴

Another fateful event of the time that propelled Dimitrov into international fame was the Reichstag Fire trial. The Reichstag burned in February 1933, shortly after the Nazis came to power, and the opportunity was seized to put on trial the communist leaders and thus crack down on the movement. Four communists were put on trial, their leader being Dimitrov who lived in Berlin at the time. Many intellectuals took up the communists’ cause, Moscow became heavily invested in the trial, and Dimitrov, who was found not guilty, fled to the Soviet Union in January 1934, after he became a citizen.

After World War II, Dimitrov returned to Bulgaria where he forged himself into a communist leader, a “little Stalin” whom the mighty Stalin, despite his proverbial paranoia, could trust. More so than any other leader in the region, Dimitrov was capable of organizing the working class and of positioning Bulgaria in the wave of Stalinist takeovers that brought communist regimes, coordinated by Moscow, to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Even before the Yalta Agreement— that made this political takeover possible—Dimitrov noted in his journal entry of January 28, 1945, that Stalin confined to the Bulgarian communist and trusted political ally his own vision of post-World War II Europe as a conflict between the Soviet and capitalist worlds, with the premises for the Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe rooted in the region’s political culture.⁵⁵ Based on its historical past, the countries of this space were incapable of conceiving the exercise of state power as anything but iron-fisted domination and totalitarian control, ready to adopt methods of brutal repression whenever authoritarian rule was threatened. In Bulgaria the authoritarian tradition of Tsar Boris III, during his short-lived postmortem worship, was the most recent evidence of a state where, as in Russia, since the days of the Byzantium, the sovereign was regarded not only as divinely chosen to act as God’s

⁵⁴ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works, Vol. VIII* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 188.

⁵⁵ Silvio Pons, “Stalin and the European Communists after World War Two (1943–1948),” in *Post-war Reconstruction in Europe: International Perspectives, 1945–1949*, ed. Mark Mazower, Jessica Reinisch, and David Feldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

representative on earth, but also as guardian of the Christian Orthodox flock. In the communist rule of Stalin's time, and of Dimitrov's Bulgaria, the notion of church and state had a similar resonance, in the sense that Stalin or Dimitrov embodied a legitimate government, perceived as representing a divine order.

Framed by World War I (a conflict that had marked the dissolution of Tsarist Russia but had failed to replace its antiquated structure with an egalitarian system) and by the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, post-World War II Soviet Union imposed upon the countries of Central and Eastern Europe a political agenda that would bring not only historical separation of the region from the rest of Europe, but it also caused the region's instauration of a dehumanizing communist political culture that was so much easier to reinforce in countries with a weak democratic tradition and geographically distant from the democracies of the other side of Europe. And in Bulgaria, which had traditional cultural ties to Russia, more than to any other country of the Soviet bloc there was a similar cultural and political inertia and a subsistence economy in which isolated families in the sparsely populated Russian and Bulgarian countryside supplied and consumed what they produced. Like Russian, Bulgarian is a Slavonic language, which allows Bulgarians to understand Russian without great difficulty. Having being enmeshed historically in the Byzantine Commonwealth,⁵⁶ both countries inclined through their Orthodox practices toward a more rigid form of monotheism that centered on icons and innumerable ceremonies which claimed to replicate the divine heavens on earth—a sort of sublime totality that made political authority unchallengeable. As in Russia, the target of totalitarian remaking in Bulgaria was thus the individual dissident or nonconformism, but civil society itself. Any organization that operated outside the dictates of the Party devised after the Soviet model was eliminated or nationalized within a static system of totalitarianism in practice. Ultimately, the entire country was subsumed into a single communist agency run by the powerful Party that Dimitrov organized with special

⁵⁶ This expression belongs to D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

forcefulness, by pointing out the necessity of a “strong, indissoluble alliance with the great Soviet people.”⁵⁷

Stalinist Russia’s police-state climate—enforced through the systematic persecution, intimidation, and arrest of anticommunists—was copied in Bulgaria by a peripheral ruler of the Soviet empire, revealed to a contemporary playwrights like Yordanov the multifaceted and dynamic contact and continuity between such political tactics and the violent history and intrigues of the medieval world related in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, both in the play and in the play within the play.

As Margreta de Grazia’s *Hamlet without Hamlet* convincingly argues, Shakespeare’s classic began to look modern in the nineteenth century because Hamlet’s presumed psychological makeup began to look modern. But in the twentieth century, in light of a modernism that perceived the whole play and its protagonist in a special political context, many stage productions of *Hamlet* manifested the intellectual and political preoccupations of the postmodern Central and Eastern Europe. The play’s political slant did, in fact, alarm Stalinist Russia. After a production at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1924–25 under Michael Chekhov’s direction ran into trouble with the Soviet authorities for its antiauthoritarian (and hence “reactionary”) political overtones, theatrical performances of *Hamlet* were subsequently banned until Stalin’s death in 1953. A year later, Grigory Kozintsev’s *Hamlet*, produced in Leningrad in 1954, reflected the work of a director who had spent much of the war in a prison camp. His mission, to paraphrase his own words, was to analyze what was happening in the prison state around him.

A remarkable black-and-white version of the film was made in 1974 when Kozintsev teamed up with Boris Pasternak, as the textual translator, and with Dmitri Shostakovich, as musical composer, to create a political film in which Hamlet’s thinking is dangerous because it is political. As David Bevington suggests, Kozintsev’s use of Claudius’s monumental statues points to the Stalinist cult of personality, the instructions of Polonius to his servant Reynaldo to keep close watch over Laertes in Paris reveal the eavesdropping

⁵⁷ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. X (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 418–19. Quoted in V. Hadjinikolov, “Georgi Dimitrov and the Role of the Soviet Union in the World Revolution Process,” in *Georgi Dimitrov: An Outstanding Militant of the Comintern* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 308.

and the intrigues of Danish court but also of communist Russia, and the constrictive metallic corset and petticoats of Ophelia are emblematic of the inability to express any personal freedom. Finally Elsinore, with its stone walls and drawbridge, becomes a state prison suggestive of the Soviet Union as a savagely controlled police state.⁵⁸

With the discouragement about contemporary social and political life in the aftermath of the partition of Europe into a politically divided East and West, the conflict that separated Denmark from Norway in *Hamlet* reminded audiences of Europe's Iron Curtain, and that history repeats as farce. In this context, *Murder Most Foul* offers an impressive enumeration of such productions complete with actors' names and significant directorial engagement. Of these, worth reiterating here is the set designed by William Dudley for Richard Eyre's 1980 production of *Hamlet* at London's Royal Court which suggested a prison space: the armed guards stationed at the theater's many doors contributed to the acute realization of a state control so oppressive that Hamlet and the spectators too were under constant surveillance. Later in that play, Hamlet's attempt to evade his pursuers, suggested on stage by his opening one *trompe l'oeil* door after another, only to find an armed spy behind each, maintained the oppressive feeling of a totalitarian state that resembled a cage. In early 1982, productions like Jonathan Miller's *Hamlet* at London's Warehouse Theatre portrayed the play as a world in which politics are a game and a lie and continued to sustain the perception of Shakespeare's classic as a politically engaging performance.

Yordanov's title, which is also the title of the play within the play in *Hamlet*, leaves no doubt about its kinship to the Shakespearean original as an explicit backdrop. It also conveys the idea that Yordanov has written a very good modern play with all names changed to the Shakespearean characters. In this immediate sense, Yordanov's play is not very different from Tom Stoppard's clever rewriting of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. However, unlike Stoppard's play, whose shift in emphasis from the tragic prince of Denmark to the sordid fate of his two friends from Wittenberg bears no significant impact on the dramatic outcome, Yordanov's palimpsest attaches an unexpected twist and a strong political dimension

⁵⁸ I am indebted to David Bevington's excellent remarks, which I follow closely here; see his *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet through the Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 154–55.

to the turn of events that reflects a sense of contemporaneity similar to the one found in the Shakespearean original. As Margreta de Grazia remarks, in that play Hamlet's ties to the University of Wittenberg where Martin Luther, the monk who split Christendom in two, held an appointment and where he famously posted his incendiary ninety-five theses on the Castle Church door, and the theatrical flare-up between the rival boy and adult companies in 1600 England that are echoed in the competition between theatrical companies that brings the Players to Elsinore, all bear the stamp of political conflicts contemporary with Shakespeare's own time.⁵⁹

Written and staged in 1988 at the Burgas Theatre at the twilight of the Cold War, and subsequently dramatized fairly regularly in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and in Russia, Yordanov's play foregrounds the iron-fisted authority of totalitarian and despotic regimes and the traumatizing consequences of the intervention of police states in the lives of individuals, underscoring the insurrectional quality of theater in Central and Eastern Europe and its ability to subvert classical models for political aims. As they are manipulated and victimized in their most legitimate professional and personal interactions, Yordanov's characters, imagined or borrowed from Shakespeare, reveal the precarious condition of love, friendship, and loyalty, whose conceptualized normativity is challenged, altered, and distorted in its most perverse forms during times that feel as rotten in Yordanov's communist Bulgaria as in *Hamlet's* Denmark. Much like Shakespeare's play, which is set in Denmark but has England drawn into the picture by the time period shared with the two Scandinavian nations, Denmark and Norway, before the great epochal divide of the Norman Conquest from which English royalty traced its beginnings, Yordanov's play, which is putatively set in Denmark, impinges upon post-Yalta, Moscow-dominated contemporary Bulgaria as the real backdrop to *The Murder of Gonzago*. Regicide, usurpation, conquests, and imperial domination that have broken generational patrilineal lines make *Hamlet* a play filled with contests over land involving Norway, Poland, England, and, of course, Denmark. Projected into Yordanov's play, such political crimes of territorial expansion and ideological appropriation propel *The Murder of Gonzago* into contemporaneity, satu-

⁵⁹ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72.

rating it with the past, in subversive preparation for and acknowledgment of Stalinist conquests in Central and Eastern Europe in general, and of Bulgaria in particular.

The Stalinist repressive ideology and criminal initiatives imposed in the communist bloc hit a dead end in the theater world. Here the system of political monitoring, particularly after the Prague Spring of 1968, subsided gradually, becoming relatively ineffective. While the Bulgarian culture commissars censored dialogue and imposed Party rhetoric praising the Soviet state, it was much harder to censor the stage world, with its metaphorical forms of expression, which the Party struggled to control. Engaged in a type of cultural Cold War, the theater was an institution that made a difference in the eventual overthrow of communism, from Berlin to Sofia. Yordanov's play most likely did a whole lot to fuel the national Bulgarian spirit stirring public disapproval and the free-floating notion that there is something rebellious and world-changing about the staged dramatization of a country trapped, in the contemporary world, in Soviet communism.

The Murder of Gonzago opens with the memorable arrival of the actors at Elsinore, a beginning that brings to prominence the role of theatrical performances in politically sensitive situations, such as the crisis triggered by what appears to have been the murder of the old King, the resulting transfer of power to his brother, Claudius, and the marriage of the Queen to her former brother-in-law. Beyond the play's brilliantly devised plot and ingeniously orchestrated dénouement that offer plausibly hypothetical alternatives to the familiar story of Hamlet, Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* also presents an emotional tribute to the art of acting and to the politically active role that actors and the theater world can fulfill in totalitarian systems.

Having entered the closed-in space of the Elsinore Castle, the actors begin to rehearse the play with its sixteen additional lines that Hamlet has prepared for Charles, the principal actor and troupe director. Although Yordanov's text parallels to this point the original play to the very minute detail of the rivalry between the young actor Henry and the older Benvolio, it becomes increasingly obvious that there is added intrigue and that a web of conspiracies is looming in Yordanov's rewrite. To begin with, there is nothing historical about Charles's character, who is silvery and rapid

with insight. More importantly, Polonius appears as a more alert character and not, in Horatio's words, "the fool you make yourself out to be"⁶⁰ in the Shakespearean original. In Yordanov's play, Polonius has his own agenda, which partially coincides with Hamlet's. Like Hamlet, the old servant wishes to dispose of Claudius and dispatches his spies to keep close watch over the unsuspecting king; however, since he is aware of Hamlet's inability to rule, because as he tells Horatio, "a man who cannot control himself cannot control anyone else,"⁶¹ Polonius plots a secret alliance with Fortinbras, a young man whose political misfortunes make him if not quite a hero yet, then at least an attractive prospect for Polonius's self-aggrandizing scheme. Such an extravagant, but not impossible, scheme would bring his own son, Laertes, to the throne of Denmark and also free Ophelia to marry Fortinbras.

Acting on his suspicion that the staging of *The Murder of Gonzago* is maneuvered by Hamlet and that its aim is to unmask his crime, Yordanov's Claudius, in a departure from the Shakespearean original, averts his most concentrated vengeance on the players. He orders their arrest and subjects them to the interrogations and torture that echo for the audience the reality of Stalinist tactics in the Soviet Union: the torture chambers of 1937 and of the Gulag, and later on the persecutions of citizens in the communist countries, a colonial population of some ninety million people the Soviets controlled from the moment their troops arrived after the 1945 Yalta agreement until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In Yordanov's play, under the brutality of the Executioner's treatment, the troupe's promiscuous actress Amalia, and the actors, Henry and Benvolio, who begin to understand the fragility of their lives and the obstinacy of their prosecutors, carve, point fingers, and become self-destructive as they are forced into coerced self-criticisms and confessions of presumed guilt to overthrow Claudius. As each of the actors repeats the scripted identification, "My name is filthy swine and my profession is to dig in the swill,"⁶² the process of betrayal is coldly detailed in the exchange between the Executioner and the traitor among the actors, who proves to be the Prompt:

⁶⁰ Nedyalko Yordanov, *Ubiystvoto na Gonzago [The Murder of Gonzago]* (Sofia: Biblioteka 48, 1999) 9–104. All quotations are from this edition.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 93.

PROMPT: Dare I ask you something, sir?

EXECUTIONER: Briefly!

PROMPT: Why do you always begin with name and profession?

EXECUTIONER: Have you ever deflowered a woman?

PROMPT: No, sir. The only ones I know have been deflowered ages ago.

EXECUTIONER: Then you'll understand me well. Women only resist the first time.

PROMPT: Your example is not completely clear.

EXECUTIONER: Do you know how someone becomes a traitor?

PROMPT: I know. First you have to betray yourself.

EXECUTIONER: Exactly. And then?

PROMPT: Then there's no problem. Then you betray the others without any scruples... It's becoming clear to me now.⁶³

Just as in a police state, complete with a panopticon system, where the lowest ranking and seemingly least threatening people are filled with acute class consciousness and often prove to be the most vicious and dangerous, the Prompt plays a sinister role in the denunciation, the forced confessions, and the torture of his fellow actors.

This is not to say that Polonius, the King's trusted Counselor or "the King's ear," as he prefers to think of himself, is not the master spy and the greatest villain of *The Murder of Gonzago*. As he tells the young and still innocent Horatio, Polonius has successfully disposed of all the King's counselors by spreading false rumors that they were agents of the Norwegian king Fortinbras. Like the Stalinist leaders in Yordanov's Bulgaria and the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, who had early on embraced a cult of massive exterminations, Polonius appears to have grasped the convenience of death as the simplest and most effective political tool. This reliable solution, which allows Polonius to be the only counselor left, also gives him time to save himself. As the old servant knows all too well, his turn to be executed will come next, which is why he has to hurry to have Claudius killed first. To Yordanov's audiences, Polonius's actions echo the sort of leadership the communist system required to enable individual survival and political advancement. As Stalin is rumored to have said after ordering that a barge

⁶³ Ibid., 94.

carrying a group of Trotsky supporters be sunk, “Death solves all problems. No man, no problem.”⁶⁴ This was indeed the Bolshevik way that resonates in Yordanov’s new-old play through Polonius’s actions.

An experienced spinner of court intrigues, Polonius does not appear to end his vast web of plotting even after achieving such anticipated political objectives. As he tells Horatio with ruthless candor, in his planned memoirs, Polonius will dress the young scholar and friend of Hamlet in treacherous words and carefully documented accusations, ensuring Horatio’s execution for plotting against the authority of the state.

Horatio himself appears to be a quick study and increasingly terrifying as a feared henchman, not unlike a “vanguard Bolshevik” blooded by the brutality of Polonius’s tactics and ruthlessness. In the play’s shocking developments, Horatio, whose legendary friendship and loyalty for Hamlet are all but lost, survives at the end of Shakespeare’s play to allow for Yordanov’s political rewriting. In *The Murder of Gonzago*, Horatio is the supreme traitor, the embodiment of the naked political evil, and the only survivor, who remains not to tell the tale, but to act as a servant of what will become the modern state, for good and ill. He welcomes Fortinbras and pledges his services to the new master, becoming toward the end of Yordanov’s play the forerunner of O’Brien in George Orwell’s *1984* or perhaps offering a glimpse into the complicated psychology of the artist or intellectual who is forced to adapt to totalitarian regimes, a type well-known in the West through books such as Czesław Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind* (1953), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* (1968), and Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979).

Yordanov’s point of departure in this ingenious presentation of Hamlet’s friend from Wittenberg may be found in Horatio’s last comments in *Hamlet* on the tragic tale that he and the audience have witnessed. Horatio, though broken-hearted at the loss of his dear friend, has always differed from Hamlet on philosophical issues. He does so still, through implication at least, at the end of the play when he promises to reveal to the others a saga

⁶⁴ For a detailed discussion, see Simon Sebag Montefiori, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 33.

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.⁶⁵

Different from Hamlet, Horatio has a secular view of history, in which events occur accidentally, casually, or as a result of political violence. A sense of reciprocity informs this view, as though somehow violence punishes itself, but it does not do so through providential guidance, as Hamlet thinks. Horatio's interpretation of history in Shakespeare's play is more nearly existential, despite his calling at times on God as a witness and protector. He is a skeptic and a rationalist, ready to see what he can see with "the sensible and true avouch" of his own eyes.⁶⁶ His skepticism is dramatically useful, as an Elizabethan audience is likely to be persuaded of those wondrous things Horatio evokes, such as the reality of the Ghost or the murder of King Hamlet.

Still, Horatio's interpretation of events is finally at variance with Hamlet's own since Hamlet's final determination is to leave matters in the hands of Providence, trusting that he can then be an agent of divine will. Horatio's secular and existential view of history implicitly denies providentiality and invites a deep uncertainty about the role of the heavens, if any, in human affairs. It also allows for Horatio's participation in a modern version of *Hamlet* as a symbol of treason and heresy and a potent vehicle for expressing political dissent, ruthlessness, and betrayals. Switching his loyalty from Hamlet to Fortinbras, Horatio indicates his keen awareness of political conflict that was as much an interest to Elizabethan audiences as it was to Yordanov's contemporaries. As Horatio hounds his adversaries, his words are pregnant with all the future miscarriages of the totalitarian state. His mind may drift into reverie and fond anecdote, but it is mainly reticent, tout, controlled. Horatio is a master of his silences and prosecutor of other people's.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.383–7.

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.1.60–2.

⁶⁷ This view of Horatio has gained much support from recent dramatic and literary transcreations. A powerful example is Boris Akunin's *Hamlet, A Version* (Bucharest:

Sharing Horatio's taste for frightening and violent solutions, Fortinbras is a role model for brutal political takeovers who knows that he needs Horatio's help to dispel all questions and secure for himself succession to the throne. This new king, who appears able to storm any fortress, knows that he too will need the support of the actors to maintain and consolidate his power. That is precisely why Fortinbras displays gracious patronage and charm as he makes the players an offer they cannot refuse: he decrees that the actors be paid and elevated to the superior rank of a regal troupe that would in the future serve his interests and support his policies in the kingdom.

As in the Shakespearean original where the play within the play features shocking betrayals, spying, power struggles, poisonings, and violent reversals, in Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* secretive plots, false testimonies, and murders are the means by which to eliminate enemies. Polonius's hints at his dislike of Horatio and his threats to attribute political intrigue and secret plotting against the king to the young man are reminiscent of Soviet tactics on the real stage of the communist countries, where the only dissident voice that can be heard by all is that brought to the stage in a theatrical production. *Hamlet* the play becomes a potent vehicle for expressing political dissent and disillusionment. Polonius and Horatio are monsters, but familiar ones, no more alien and forbidding than Beria, Stalin's chief of secret police. There is something terrifyingly refreshing about this political revisionism, which explains Yordanov's need to rely on a Shakespearean classic and use it as a prism through which to examine Stalinist Bulgaria.⁶⁸

When questioned about the right to subvert the authority of the king, Charles, the troupe director, proudly invokes his rights as an actor, that is "the right of art to which I serve and which is obliged to tell the truth."⁶⁹ In a world where politics are a game and a lie, Charles, who in so many ways

Europress, 2014) a play whose ingenious plot features the suicide of King Hamlet and subsequent attempt of Gertrude and Claudius to cover it up and the invention of the Ghost by a cunning Horatio, who is Fortinbras's agent.

⁶⁸ For other approaches to the subversive use of Shakespeare in an Eastern European context, see Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova's influential study *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001).

⁶⁹ Yordanov, *Murder*, 108.

may be considered Yordanov's mouthpiece, could sense that the reinvention of the play within the play in *Hamlet* helps him see the terror squarely, just as *The Murder of Gonzago* registers Yordanov's resolute gaze at and ideological protest against Soviet dictatorship in Bulgaria. At the court of Claudius in *The Murder of Gonzago*, the actors who have challenged the king's authority must die because, as Polonius tells Horatio, "people of art are like appendices ... When they are dormant, they are harmless, but when they begin to make themselves known, they have to be removed."⁷⁰ Speaking indirectly about the actor's implicit, sacrificial engagement in fulfilling political rebellion and revolutionary causes without any regard for personal safety, Charles's wife, Elizabeth, tells the Executioner, "Art is above everything ... Whoever devotes his life to art does not have the right to a private life ... The actor has to be able to utter the truth ... Ten kings cannot do what one actor can do."⁷¹

This is a message that the audiences in the Soviet bloc could easily acknowledge. The boorish dogma propagated by the Stalinist machine to remake or brainwash people turning them into the "new man"—*Homo Sovieticus*, as he was satirically known—proved elusive. Stalinism was dangerous, but also irrational, inefficient, and ultimately absurd. And in the totalitarian states, the theater was a form of resistance practiced daily by dramatizing those things that everyone knew about, the fallacies of the aberrant ideology and the failures of the system. A few years before Yordanov's *Murder of Gonzago*, in neighboring Romania, the director Alexandru Tocilescu staged at Bucharest's Bulandra Theatre in 1985 a politically focused *Hamlet*, a protagonist who coped as heroically as he could with the corrupt regime of Claudius, transparent as a mere artistic disguise of the Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.⁷² In the leading role, the actor Ion Caramitru played a particularly significant part in that he was also one of the leaders

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁷¹ Ibid., 112.

⁷² For a detailed analysis of Tocilescu's *Hamlet* production, see Nicoleta Cinpoș's monograph *Shakespeare's Hamlet in Romania, 1778–2008: A Study in Translation, Performance, and Cultural Adaptation* (Levinstone, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010) and the article Nicoleta Cinpoș, "The Long Night's Journey into Today: The Romanian *Hamlet* of the '80s" in *Shakespeare in Romania, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Monica Matei-Chesnoiu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008). See also Jozefina Komporaly, "Hamlet as Contestation: On Truth, Revelation and Performability," in *Radical*

of the revolution against the government that would bring to the world stage the execution of Ceaușescu in 1989. This Hamlet production and its afterlife, is unrivalled to this day in its political topicality in a Romanian context, although British-Romanian Shakespeare scholar Nicoleta Cinpoș suggests that Tocilescu had a more complex agenda than simply drawing a parallel between Ceaușescu and Claudius, on the one hand, and his wife, Elena and Gertrude, on the other. Cinpoș claims that “a straightforward ‘translation’ would have been too facile even for the censors to detect and ban,” and sees “the 1985 production’s achievement as exposing the cracks in the mirrors. The production’s main business, to expose all readings—in its terms, all mirrors—as subjective, limiting and limited interpretations of *Hamlet*, was its most acute observation.”⁷³

Underscoring the role of the actors, Yordanov’s brilliant dramatic construction brings a special homage to the politically engaged theater of Eastern Europe. Few in the contemporary audience of Yordanov’s play would have been able to denounce publicly the dismal actions of Stalinism. But they felt engaged politically when they were invited indirectly to detect in King Hamlet’s poisoning reenacted in the Bulgarian playwright’s *The Murder of Gonzago* allusions to the reality of Stalin’s customary practice of having his enemies poisoned. Featured prominently in Shakespeare’s play, the poisoning theme is the cardinal link between the play within the play and the Hamlet story proper. In asking Horatio’s help during the forthcoming entertainment, Hamlet says:

There is a play to night before the King,
One Scene of it comes neere the Circumstance
Which I have told thee, of my Father’s death.⁷⁴

Previously, his father has told Hamlet how he was murdered by having poison poured into his ears, and the play-scene shows this act twice, once in the Dumbshow and again with the speech. In the world of Italian princes, which Shakespeare consulted to find suitable topics for his plays, murder

Revival as Adaptation: Theatre, Politics, Society, ed. Jozefina Komporalý (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).

⁷³ Cinpoș, *Shakespeare’s Hamlet in Romania*, 170.

⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.70–3.

by poisoning was a relatively common occurrence. Critics generally agree that at least one of Shakespeare's sources for *The Murder of Gonzago* was a story "written in very choice Italian" recounting the actual poisoning of Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino by his barber Luigi Gonzaga, who had been hired for the murder by one of the duke's political rivals, Marchese di Castelfelfredo.⁷⁵ Such murders, which were manipulated with great freedom in most medieval plays, were often politically motivated or done to extract revenge. But in adapting the pivotal poisoning scene in *The Murder of Gonzago* for the audiences of the Soviet Union and of Eastern Europe, Yordanov magnifies this important element of the Shakespearean original to trigger through theatrical representation the more immediate memory of Stalin's court and of Stalin as supreme poisoner. To reproduce the atmosphere of what may have been a tense situation at the Kremlin of Stalin's time, Yordanov has Ophelia describing for the actors in *The Murder of Gonzago* the royal feast celebrated at Elsinore:

OPHELIA: Please call me Ophelia. I'm having such fun with you ... What a big trunk. If father comes looking for me, you can hide me inside ... That royal feast is such a bore.

Roar of a cannon

The King's raising another toast. He'll be making a speech in a moment. It's always the same. Two hundred people staring into his mouth. Father treading on my foot under the table so as I don't giggle. It's hard not to giggle. Can you imagine it, Lola, the head wine taster has to drink from the jug and we all sit and watch waiting for him to be poisoned. It's so funny. Only then does he pour some into the King's glass. Then the King's cook comes and tries some of the roast meat, and we sit and wait for him to be poisoned, and he stands there like this, all stupid... . You laughed, so I must have performed it well. An actor must know how to perform.⁷⁶

The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, which holds Stalin's notes, records his scribbling on a memo pad during a May 7, 1929 Politburo meeting "Poison, poison, Nadir Khan." Beria, one of Stalin's chief

⁷⁵ For an excellent discussion of this episode in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, see Margreta de Grazia's *Hamlet without Hamlet*, ch. 3.

⁷⁶ Yordanov, *Murder*, 73.

executioners, did not think twice before heeding Stalin's orders to "poison, poison" close collaborators and rivals alike. According to Montefiore's *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, after dinner with Beria in Tiflis (today's Tbilisi), Nestor Lakoba, one of Stalin's Abkhazian loyal friends, was overcome with nausea and died, but not before groaning, "That snake Beria has killed me." Although the official cause of death was "heart attack," Stalin's entourage knew that the Red Tsar had ordered the poisoning of the forty-three year old Lakoba, who was subsequently declared a vile traitor of the cause or an Enemy of the People.

According to Montefiore, it was common knowledge in the Soviet Union that the NKVD boasted a department of medical poisoners under Dr. Grigory Marionovsky, although Stalin's devotees like Beria and his circle needed little help in such matters. Added to their creative Borgia-like venoms used to kill the enemies within the Party, mercury poisoning also had a special pedigree at Stalin's court. Feared henchmen like Yezhov, after spraying his own office with mercury, claimed that his political rival Yagoda, who had poisoned Gorky's son Max Peshkov, had done it in an unsuccessful attempt to poison him.

Despite the widespread awareness of the Soviet Union's controlling and paranoid system very few among the spectators of Yordanov's play would have admitted publicly their knowledge of mass murders in Stalinist Russia and throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Yet they were eager to identify in Claudius's order to execute the players for staging a subversive play the hundreds of thousands of executions, most often by quota, which were known in the Soviet Union as the "Highest Measure of Punishment." Stalin, the supreme mass murderer who regarded such executions as noble Party service, usually delegated them to henchmen like Beria, Yezhov, or Yagoda. But the man who literally carried out most of the political executions, killing thousands personally, was a Chekist named Blokhin, a brute with black hair pushed back and a leather butcher's apron to protect his uniform.

In Yordanov's play, the Executioner, who occupies centerstage after the actors' arrest, appears to have more in common with the butcher of Stalin's court than sheer brutality and monstrosity. At play's end, when Horatio brings in the new proclamation by which Fortinbras releases the actors and awards them for their allegiance, the Executioner is spared the death sentence. His anxiety is put to rest when Horatio, the newly appointed First

Counselor to the King, announces: "Taking into account your experience, you are appointed to the post of royal executioner, my royal executioner."⁷⁷ This unusual clemency for Yordanov's Executioner at a moment of such great violence and betrayals echoes Stalin's uncharacteristic decision to spare Blokhin's life. When Beria brought Stalin the death sentence for the executioner himself after the death of Yezhov, Stalin refused Beria's request saying that Blokhin's "black work" was difficult but very important for the Party. And so Blokhin was spared to kill thousands more, his job as indispensable in Stalin's Soviet Union, or in any of its satellite countries, as that of the Executioner in Yordanov's subversive play.

Yordanov's rewrite of the brutally enforced order and criminal tactics of the communist societies, complete with spies, betrayals, and dramatic reversals, may not be as eccentric as it seems since the imagined similarity between the chaotic violence of *The Murder of Gonzago* and the slayings of medieval princes staged in *Hamlet*, both in the play itself and in the play within a play, is formed at the intersection of imperial spaces with a new order. Thus, the theatrical discourse of Yordanov's and Shakespeare's plays is strongly associated with political intent. The Russian tsar is overthrown, and the Bolshevik Revolution ushers in the communist state, which later forces its criminal ideology and brutal tactics on the subjugated countries of Central and Eastern Europe. With his last breath, Hamlet announces that Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway orphaned when his father was killed in a bloody war of territorial aggression by the old King of Denmark, is now the avenger who will appropriate the crown and the throne that once belonged to the murderer of his father. And so it goes: brutality and violent death, used to toss bodies around the stage, can also be silenced to make it sound like treason when the interrogator takes his leave of the tortured—an option dramatically captured in Vişniec's rewrite of yet another Shakespearean classic, *Richard III*, to subversively stage the arrest, torture, and execution of Vsevolod Meyerhold in Stalin's Soviet Union.

Yordanov's adaptation of *Hamlet* as a politically subversive play that engages a contemporary audience makes sense in terms of a process of transcultural borrowings between the medieval world and the Soviet Union/East Central Europe. After King Hamlet's death, Claudius's reign at Elsinore

⁷⁷ Yordanov, *Murder*, 116.

was not much different from Stalin's rule of paranoia and power games at the Kremlin and of communist leaders' oppression of their people in the police states of the Soviet bloc. In a play that must have reminded Yordanov's audiences not only of the Soviet Union where Stalin, the Red Tsar, surrounded himself by courtiers as everyone was engaged in a game of paranoia and power, but of all the communist states that lived in a secret world of fear, betrayal, and state-orchestrated murders. The actors in *The Murder of Gonzago* are forbidden to leave Claudius's court which, in the words of Polonius, is "full of gossip and spies" and where "the walls have ears." Polonius ought to have known. As the old courtier tells Horatio, "these are the rules of the game,"⁷⁸ a game Polonius plays at every turn when he sends his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, his own son, and then offers himself to Claudius to spy on Hamlet.

In the ensuing whispers and intrigues aired in the conversations among characters, Horatio tells Charles, "I will say something to you, but I will show you the opposite."⁷⁹ Further, Polonius's recitation of verses from his own "memoirs," which he threatens to attribute to Horatio, if necessary, in a hypothetical power struggle between the two of them, must have brought to the mind of Yordanov's audiences in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe the recognizable landscape of their own homeland:

Denmark is a goal
And the whole world is a goal.
Perfect, with countless cells, dungeons and holes.
Denmark is the worst.⁸⁰

Hamlet is marked by a great amount of political material and international intervention which may be unusual next to other Shakespearean works, but not entirely out of place in Yordanov's play that takes subversive aim at the expansionist and devious diplomacy of Stalin's Russia. Ambassadors go to Norway and return; Fortinbras wishes to conquer Denmark under the pretext of defending himself against Poland, much like Stalin who claimed to have liberated Central and Eastern Europe and felt that the Soviet Union

⁷⁸ Ibid., 11, 2, 27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 30.

was engaged in deadly combat with the expansionist tendencies of the West; Rozencrantz and Guildenstern are dispatched to England, ostensibly to demand tribute, actually to have Hamlet killed. If Claudius's plan to have Hamlet killed in such a sly and underhanded way echoes Stalin's customary sadism in killing those close to him, then the expectation and extortion of a tribute by a suzerain power like twentieth-century Soviet Union was more than an oblique reminder of Stalin and the Kremlin's treatment of the Soviet bloc countries as fiefdoms. The construction of the wall that encircled West Berlin in 1961 was a permanent advertisement for the carceral nature of Soviet communism.

The parallel forms of political upheaval operating in the two spaces, Russia's communist takeovers and medieval Europe's territorial wars, are actualized on stage under the directions of the principal actor of the wandering troupes, both in *Hamlet* and in *The Murder of Gonzago*, in tacit but firm recognition of the powerful role of the theater, "the play's the thing," and of actors in stirring political dissent. But if the lead actor in the Shakespearean original remains passive after the enactment of the play within the play, which consists of the insertion of "some dozen or sixteen lines," the principal actor of the itinerant troupe in Yordanov's play is far from disengaged. In a series of dramatic summersaults, he evolves into a catalyst that acquires an urgent dimension through direct implication in his own political quest. His newfound consciousness initially mediated, as in *Hamlet*, by imperial sovereignty, is ultimately internalized and transformed into a revolutionary ferment stirring from within. Charles takes his nourishment from his own revolutionary spirit that prompts him into decisive and courageous action in ways that recall the political engagement of actors and the theater world (e.g., the case of Václav Havel in communist Czechoslovakia) in the critical moments of Central and Eastern Europe's recent history of political conflict and that echo Mayakovsky's reflections upon the capacity of the theater to project the future through "the unfettered art of the actor," whose art is in its essence dynamic.

The theatrical velocity of Yordanov's play in adapting a classic like *Hamlet* to the contemporary communist space is in line with an insurrectional theater that was rewriting traditional plays to bring them into consonance with the terror of the communist regime. In Yordanov's case, this consonance materializes in the politicization of *Hamlet*, that is in the subversion of the

Shakespearean original to fulfill a political agenda and purpose that translated for Yordanov into the freedom the stage afforded him to rebel against the definitive monopoly of Soviet power in Central and Eastern Europe in general, and the sovietization of Bulgaria conducted by one of its own, Moscow-indoctrinated native sons in particular.

Less than a year after the staging of Yordanov's play, the Iron Curtain began to lift, in 1991 the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the totalitarian remake of Bulgaria and the other countries of the communist bloc proved to be a failed experiment. But in showing how the totalitarian experiment was implemented and how it played out under the absolutist rule of Stalin as "defender of the people," Yordanov's play brings to life the vanished world of Soviet-style communism whose operational machine carried a much too high human price.

PART 3
INSERTING GOD INTO POLITICS

VII.

Specters of State Power, History, and Politics of the Stage: Vlad Zografi's *Peter or The Sun Spots*

Written in the aftermath of the political upheaval triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall, Vlad Zografi's play *Peter or The Sun Spots* brings to the stage an intriguing historical perspective on the great tsar credited with modernizing a backward country. While staging the proximities between the political and the aesthetic, the play also invites through dramatic inferences the uncanny compatibility between Peter, the White Tsar who reigned from 1682 to 1725 with the iron hand of an autocrat through the vast realm of his empire, and Stalin, the Red Tsar whose long tenure in the Kremlin, from 1928 until his death in 1953, brought to fruition the agenda of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Articulated in terms of interactions and relations between Europe's East and West, the play captures on an immediate level Peter's despotic and depraved behavior during his visit to France and, in dramatically recognizable scenes that foreshadow Stalin's absolutist system, suggests a direct lineage from the tsar to the leader known throughout the Soviet Union as the Man of Steel.

An important predecessor in this connection of Russia's manifest destiny through an iron-fisted ruler is the sixteen-century tsar Ivan IV (1533–84), whose reign earned him the appellation of *Groznyi* (the Terrible). Associated with territorial conquest, imperial domination, and harsh punishments in times of political unrest and intrigues, Tsar Ivan was invoked as a great national hero in Eisenstein's movie "Ivan the Terrible" made at Stalin's 1941 special request. Widely perceived as an allegorical portrait of Stalin who considered Ivan the Terrible his own medieval prototype, Tsar Ivan is portrayed as a providential leader whose cruelty and violence become a justification for the purges of the 1930s. Historically, the tsar's murderous

exploits that provided an apologia for the future Russian rulers' pursuit of political power in Eastern Europe also paralleled the stories of conquest and political intrigues of medieval Western Europe.

The violence in Tsar Ivan's reign also acquired further significance in the pan-European context of Russia's pursuit of Christian values and tradition going back to the glory of Byzantium. After the final victory against the khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the 1550s, Ivan the Terrible ordered the construction of a new cathedral on the Red Square. Originally named the Intercession of the Virgin, in honor of the sacred feast day when Ivan IV had captured the Tatar capital of Kazan, St. Basil's Church marked the triumph of the Orthodox traditions of Byzantium and signaled Moscow's rise as the new Rome that was leading the religious war against the Mongol-Tatar raids from the steppes. To many of the Russian faithful, Moscow was a successor to Rome and Constantinople, with the gold-domed St. Basil's Church an immediate counterpart and heir to Hagia Sophia after Constantinople had fallen to the Turks in 1453. In time, Moscow's embrace of Orthodoxy was cemented by the city's 200 documented churches and monasteries until the fires of 1821 during Napoleon's occupation.¹

After the razing of medieval Moscow to the ground by the fires, Peter the Great, who hated the city considering it a nest of Old Believers, complacent in a patriarchal, enclosed community, began building St. Petersburg. Once again, the tsar was aiming for a cultural achievement that reached aesthetic cosmopolitanism and national prominence. But Moscow was rebuilt after 1812 in the European style by the opening of major spaces like the Red Square and the Theatre Square, with the Bolshoi Theatre at its center, basking in "a mythic self-image [that] was all about its Russian character."² In Eisenstein's 1933 article about his planned film "Moscow," which was never shot, Moscow reappears, complete with a recaptured claim of political hegemony as the third Rome, vivid in the proclamation of monk Filofei of Pskov during the reign of Tsar Vasili III, Ivan the Terrible's father: "So be aware, lover of God and Christ, that all Christian empires have come to an end and are gathered together in the singular empire of our sovereign in

¹ For a detailed discussion of Moscow in general, see the chapter "Moscow, Moscow" in Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Picador, 2002).

² Ibid., 155.

accordance to the books of prophecy, and this is the Russian empire: because two Romes have fallen, and a third stands, and a fourth there shall not be.”³ Eisenstein’s main thrust of Filofei’s admonition to the faithful is the intellectual and artistic life of Stalin’s Soviet Union as emblematic of hegemonic cosmopolitanism and internationalism. Implicitly, the movie highlights Stalin’s prominent role and leadership in a lineage that extends from Filofei through Ivan IV to Peter the Great in the Central and Eastern European region where, as Philip Longworth argues, the powers of the crown tended to grow, unlike those of the West which tended to decline.⁴ At the time of writing *Peter*, Zografis is fully aware that Stalin, the Red Tsar who is both political heir to violence and successor to the emperors of the Byzantium-Russian connection, has turned the Soviet state and literature and the arts, especially the film and theater world, into an instrument of promoting Stalinist ideology and of serving his own authority in controlling the masses through harsh conditions of regulation and censorship.

Made possible by the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent emergence of democratic Central European countries after forty-five years of enforced Stalinism, Zografis’s play highlights then on an immediate level a political “Peter with Stalin” pairing, analogous to the one Lacan institutes in his 1963 essay “Kant with Sade.” A reading of Kenneth Reinhard’s essay on Lacan’s startling exploration of the “with” in the juxtaposition of Kant/Sade locating Sade not at the antipodes of an Enlightenment mapped out by the morality of Kant, but as its “seamy yet continuous other side,”⁵ leads in turn to interesting perspectives in which, through the conjunctures of Zografis’s play, Peter reveals hidden truths not only about himself but also about Stalin, precisely in what Reinhard calls the non-reciprocity or asymmetrical substitution of their relationship. Specifically, Zografis’s revelation of perversions associated with Peter the Great during his visit to France, as in the unveiling of the underside of Enlightenment in the “Kant with Sade,” is predicated on the “Peter with Stalin” conjuncture based not only on

³ Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome*, 1.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this curious difference, see Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe: From Prehistory to Postcommunism*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997), 261.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Kant avec Sade,” in *Écrits*, trans. James B. Swenson (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 796.

historical congruities, but also on the critical act through which Peter and Stalin hold interchangeable roles, or “neighbor” each other, and thus articulate an ideal material of “comparative study otherwise than comparison,” complicated by history, politics, and theatrical aesthetics. Further, coming from distinct traditions but aiming at similar ends, the neighboring of Peter and Stalin is a paradigm for negotiating the subjectivity of Peter’s dramatic persona in relation not only to late-medieval Russia vis-à-vis France but mainly in the linear temporality of historical causality with the twentieth-century Soviet Union.

Absolutism was the *sine qua non* condition of both Peter’s and Stalin’s rule—an absolutism so entrenched that it never gave way to some form of political plurality, as it happened elsewhere in Western Europe. As the autocratic leaders of the most absolutist state in Europe, Tsar Peter and later Stalin, in spite of their ambitions to bring Russia in line with the rest of Europe, ruled over an overwhelmingly agrarian and underpopulated country, with no great cities in the European sense, historically and culturally isolated from the world and impossible to Westernize as long as its people lived the Russian way of life, that is a religious civilization, with monastic learning and icons everywhere, rooted in the spiritual conditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church that went back to Byzantium. Despite the efforts, Stalinism and the Soviet Union did not bring much to the dark and backward customs of the Russian past, and the people remained much the same. Tsar Peter’s project of cultural engineering to reconstruct the Russian as a European man had as much success as Stalin’s attempt to engineer the soul of the Soviet people in the vanguard socialist state.

A convincing illustration of the Russians’ way of life under autocracy, virtually undifferentiated under the white or the red tsar, is in the summary consideration of the creation of St. Petersburg and Magnitogorsk. Both cities were built as show-pieces, of Westernization and Stalinist ambitious industrialization, respectively, by forced labor and by a population that moved to undesirable locations in response to Peter’s and Stalin’s dictates. After deciding where to build the new city, Tsar Peter ordered a quarter of a million serfs and soldiers to work around the clock to clear the marshes where the Neva River runs into the Baltic Sea. With bare hands, dragging logs and stones or carting them by back for four furious months, at least half of the workforce died in building St. Petersburg. Completed in fifty

years, St. Petersburg was “a capital of bastard architecture”⁶ stolen from the Italian, the French and the Dutch styles of the older European cities that had been built over several centuries. “A city of inhuman proportions,” as Orlando Figes remarks, “St. Petersburg was ordered by an abstract symmetry of its architectural shapes rather than by the lives of its inhabitants. Indeed, the very purpose of these shapes was to regiment the Russians, like soldiers, into line ... Benois compared the city to a ‘sergeant with a stick’—it had a machine-like character.”⁷ Unable to think beyond the tsar’s orders, the Russians of Tsar Peter’s time are like machines following orders mechanically. Without the tsar’s compulsion, the city would not have been built.

A little more than 200 years later, Magnitogorsk was born as a quintessential example of the socialist city of the future, in a similarly unlikely location as that of St. Petersburg, about forty miles east of the southern tip of the Ural Mountains. The shock construction site, several hundred kilometers away from the nearest urban settlement and in the pathway of arctic cold winters, was quickly filled by people “mobilized,” that is ordered to the site by government or trade union organizations. Many of the original group arriving here thought of their dislocation as a personal tragedy, even as they had to celebrate lavish homages to Stalin at this Metallurgic Complex: *Stal i Stalin, Steel and Stalin*.⁸

The Russian people perceived both Tsar Peter and Stalin as gods whose words had to be obeyed and whose actions were providential. In 1704, dismounting from his horse in marshy land, Tsar Peter reputedly cut stripes of peat, arranged them into a cross, and then declared in the tone of divine command: “Here shall be a town.” As recounted by Figes, “as he [the tsar] said these words, legend has it that an eagle dipped in flight over Peter’s head and settled on top of two birch trees that were tied together to form an arch. Eighteenth-century panegyrists elevated Peter to the status of a god: he was Titan, Neptune and Mars rolled into one.”⁹ Unable to under-

⁶ Francesco Algarotti, *Letters to Lord Harvey and the Marquis Scipio Maffei, containing the state of the trade, marine, revenues, and forces of the Russian empire* (Glasgow: Printed for Robert Urie, 1770), 76.

⁷ Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 13.

⁸ For an outstanding description of the creation of Magnitogorsk, see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*.

⁹ Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 5.

stand how the tsar had built the city on sand, the Russian people concluded that the city had been lowered from the sky in a miraculous descent.

The sense of divine mission is also associated with Stalin's leadership. In the opening coronation scene of Eisenstein's 1943 completed version of the movie "Ivan the Terrible," the young tsar, a stand-in for Stalin, ends his speech with intentional prophetic appropriation for the Russian ruler: "Two Romes have fallen, Moscow is the third, and there will be no fourth. And for that Third Rome the single master will be I ALONE."¹⁰ The sense of a sole sovereign ruling in accordance with ancient prophecy charged Stalin's leadership with being at the center of Christendom, as successor to Rome and Constantinople.

In this context of an imaginary screen that dissimulates in dramatic terms the relationship between the self (Peter/Stalin) and the other (Russia/Russians), Zografi's play also articulates through the protective circulation of fantasy the structural impasse of Orthodoxism in early and late-medieval Russia and the Soviet Union. Borrowing once again from the extended implications of Reinhard's reading of Lacan with Levinas,¹¹ in the critical act through which one (con)text takes the place of another, the Ivan-cum-Peter/Stalin structural isomorphism directs the play onto a non-reciprocal or asymmetrical counterreading of the imperative commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" that unites Russia's Orthodox Church in the difficult conjunction with tsarist/Stalinist autocracy.

For Zografi the ongoing compulsion to return to the East-West dichotomies in general, and to Stalin in particular, is predicated on personal experiences, notably his extended stay in the USSR and in Paris as a doctoral student. Having also witnessed the demise of communism in his native Romania and the changes that occurred in the country by 1996, the year when he wrote *Peter*, Zografi foregrounds in the play repressed political and historical truths by staging a gripping interrogation of the White Tsar's autocracy, despotism, expansionist tendencies, and expressed desire to catch up with Western Europe and by suggesting their implicit compatibility with Stalin's nationalist agenda and totalitarian politics. Moreover, Zografi's use of the theater and theatrical means to express an anti-Stalinist political

¹⁰ Clark, *Moskow*, 3.

¹¹ Kenneth Reinhard, "Kant with Sade, Lacan with Levinas," *Comparative Literature Issue MLN*, 110-4 (1995): 785-808.

agenda is dramatically symmetrical with the Soviet theater and film of Stalin's time that had been transformed into an outlet of ideological power structure. In addition to propaganda films like Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* or *Potemkin* among several others, there had been first the conflictless plays of the 1930 that staged relations in industrial enterprises or collective-farm villages to highlight under titles like *The Tractor Drivers* "socialist relations to labor and property."¹² After 1952 came "the production or nomenklatura plays" that in the spirit of morality plays promoted conflicts among discredited leaders of the nomenklatura—the administrative layer of the Soviet society—and those who upheld authority of the Soviet state. The production or nomenklatura plays also served as justifications for the purges, as Stalin's senseless crimes used such cultural venues as the theater for an arena in which the purge scenario of the Soviet reality could be acted out as dramatic betrayal.

As the play unveils in Peter's Russia a culture very much attracted to the idea of the nation-state—a place where the Orthodox Church plays an intensely strong role, where secret services and spies play an important part in the society, and where people tend to behave quite irrationally in submissive and degrading ways—the field of signification opens to reveal the reciprocity between Peter's Russia and Stalin's USSR as "the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound."¹³

The historical Peter was a traveler who had seen Amsterdam, London, Berlin, and Vienna by the time he decided to go to Paris in 1717 with a large retinue of sixty-one, twenty-two persons of rank, and thirty-nine orderlies. Zografi's play, which is based on this visit to Paris, has little to do with the official reports of the time, particularly Saint-Simon's writings detailing the tsar's visit and his own meeting with Peter, which the play mentions in a preamble. Instead, Zografi uses Peter's well-documented visit to turn the Russian tsar into a subject firmly situated in the interplay of what Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetic* calls a "poetic" story or "history" that links realism with artificialism to assemble the montage of our complex

¹² For an excellent discussion of this type of theater, see Evghenii Dobrenko, "The Gogols and the Shchedrins: Lessons in Positive Satire," *Russians Studies in Literature* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 27–62.

¹³ Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," 793.

understanding.¹⁴ Devoted to the “real” representation of Russia’s history, the play portrays Peter by playing off the combination of recorded traits of the monarch with imaginary incidents of his visit in France, in order to legitimize Peter’s story and his absolute monarchy as perfectly credible and interchangeable counterparts of Stalin’s totalitarian rule over Russia, which is the dramatic implication of Zografi’s play.

Throughout the play, history functions as the perfect conduit for reporting Russia’s celebrated tsar as the utmost representation of absolutism and despotic rule. Archival information or extracts from historical accounts, such as Robert K. Massie’s *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (1981),¹⁵ provide the documented names of Peter’s party during his trip to Paris, including Gavriil Golovkin, Peter Shafirov, Peter Tolstoy, Vasily Dolgoruky, Alexander Buturlin, Andrey Osterman, and Pavel Yaguzhinsky and such incidents as Peter’s refusal to take up residence in the luxurious apartments of the Queen Mother and as his insistence on being quartered at the Hôtel Lesdiguières, whose garden could be seen from the tower windows of the Bastille. It is entirely possible, as Massie speculates, that during the weeks Peter spent strolling among the trees of the hotel’s garden, a famous Frenchman locked in the Bastille, the twenty-three-year-old François-Marie Arouet, looked down and saw the tsar’s frequent walks. Forty years later, using the name Voltaire, this prisoner would write a *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great*. Affronted by Peter’s behavior and his numerous unsupervised outings conducted without ceremony throughout the city, the French felt that the tsar displayed “a haughty air of superiority” and behaved “without any civility”¹⁶—a perception on which Zografi’s play capitalizes in order to portray the tsar’s character.

Since writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth, Zografi relies on recorded events that allow for the dramatic displays of the play’s pervasive political intentionality. Among such documented occurrences that link Peter with Stalin are Peter’s visit to the vast hospital and barracks of the Invalids where the tsar, in uncanny anticipation of

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 38.

¹⁵ Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 642.

Stalinism's rhetoric that captures the farcical relationship between subjects and Soviet authority, called the 4,000 disabled soldiers his "comrades" and Peter's conversation at the Sorbonne with a group of Catholic theologians, who gave him a plan for the reunification of the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) churches. Peter took the plan with him back to Russia, where he ordered his Russian bishops to study it and give him an opinion, which he subsequently never solicited from them. His rule, the rule of the autocrat in all matters, was supreme and absolute; unlike prelates in the West, he ordained priests of the Orthodox Church, who were required to swear an oath pledging themselves "to defend unsparingly all powers, rights and prerogatives belonging to the High Authority of His Majesty."¹⁷

Apart from such historical evidence underscoring Zograf's historical documentation, Peter's assertive identity in the play is shared in a "relational way" that enables "a double avoidance of self-sameness and total estrangement, responding to Barbara Stafford's recent plea in *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*.¹⁸ As a subject embedded in a network of partial others alongside his own entourage, the French court, the philosopher de la Manque, and the prostitute Coco, the tsar is not an isolated ruler. Zograf's dramatic logic of differential degrees of likeness provides the foundation for not only the collapse of Peter's isolation as a subject in the play, but also for a less confrontational reconfiguration of the compatible or comparable identities of Peter and, implicitly, of Stalin, and of the Russian and French cultures, with the play acting as a guide to the potential of such a separation-in-jointness of the white and the red tsars. To be sure, theirs is not a new-age harmony; however, in implying a relational jointness of Peter with Stalin, the play blurs the boundaries between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction to create a model for the fabrication of stories linked to a certain idea of history as common destiny, on Russia as a locus of political and religious relationship formation and on Peter's reign as a foundational moment for all future autocratic rule and patrilineage in the Russian Empire from the days of Ivan IV. The constant awareness that occupies the mind of the audiences watching Zograf's play, however, is the increasingly closed society in Stalinist times, the narrowing of the Soviet

¹⁷ Ibid., 648, 793.

¹⁸ Barbara Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 10, 86.

cultural horizons, interdictions of citizens to travel abroad and also internally (a difficulty examined in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*), the preponderance of censorship in all aspects of life, with fear as the principal behavioral stimulus for the Soviet people.

The opening of the play, which offers a panoramic view of an open market in Paris where Peter's spies, Ivan Semyonovich Shalyapin and Dimitri Alexeyevich Smirnov, are mingling with the crowds and the merchants, stages the differences between East and West. The two spies' regrets at not having in a long time had the chance "to castrate a heretical priest, or grill a rioter, or cut off a nun's tits," as well as their encounters with the merchants and assessment of French perfumes and other products available at "the lousy marketplace in Parizh,"¹⁹ allow the play to reach outside, beyond the immediate scene, to suggest the perception of Russian and French nationality in the early-eighteenth century, with specific patterns that evolved into our own: the kinship of a population and the definition of foreign. The dramatic intervention of the political or the system of division and boundaries that define what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime, is gleaned in such exchanges as those of the French duke's statement that "France is much richer than you can imagine. France is a big country,"²⁰ the Courtier Olivier's response that "Russia is a thousand times bigger," or in the duke's arrogant acknowledgment that the French will conquer the world not through philosophy or engineering but by "gorge[ing] everybody chockfull with our gastronomic culture and asphyxiate[ing] them with our perfumes."²¹

Not unlike Paris, Moscow was in Peter's time a space with a brawling, open-air marketplace, with rows and rows of shops and wood stalls teeming and reverberating around a Red Square, different from the silent cobbled streets one finds today beneath the fantastic, clustered steeples and cupolas of Saint Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin walls. Then it was filled with merchants shouting at customers to step up and inspect their exotic, far-Eastern wares, the velvet, brocade, Persian and Armenian silk, bronze, brass

¹⁹ Vlad Zografi, "Peter or the Sun Spots," in *Kiss Me: Confessions of a Bare-Footed Leper*, ed. Vlad Zografi, trans. Ileana Alexandra Orlich (Gardena: Bettie Youngs, 2011), 23. All quotations are from this edition.

²⁰ Zografi, *Kiss Me*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

and copper goods, iron wares, tooled leather, pottery, and innumerable objects made of wood, offering a different kind of trade from the French refineries Peter's spies disdain. In both places, there were also women like the play's Coco, who in addition to goods might be selling another commodity, and who located their customers as easily and readily as Coco finds Peter.

Early in the play, the French courtiers report on the Russian tsar who scandalizes the French court with his unthinkable stinginess and his course manners, such as snatching watches from the corset of French countesses, a practice familiar to the generations of World War II. During the first years of Soviet occupation of the Central and Eastern European countries, the Red Army soldiers were known to snatch people's watches or winter coats by using the ubiquitous "davai"—the Turkic verbal form which signals, in the language of the streets, the intention of many acts, such as "give me" or "let's do it." Clearly, in Zografi's play politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigms as meaning produced by the actors' bodies, the imaginary stories, or the functions of speech. Peter's behavior toward Coco, the prostitute he humiliates and for whose services he refuses to pay adequately, actualizes his power in the very act of signaling his discretionary authority. To document Peter's behavior in the play, Zografi did not have to look any further than to such historical accounts as Peter's 1716 visit to Copenhagen, Denmark. The recorded incident, which focuses on King Frederic IV's smiling remark to Peter, "I hear you also have a mistress," has Peter snapping back to say that "my harlots do not cost me much, but yours cost you thousands of pounds which could be better spent."²²

In Zografi's play, Peter's reason for the visit to France is emblematic of the historical Peter experiences of using his travels to learn for himself but also to bring new technologies necessary to turn Russia into a modern European state. According to Figes, such visits resulted in bringing back to Russia "a navy modeled on the Dutch and the English ones; military schools that were copies of the Swedish and the Prussian; legal systems borrowed from the Germans."²³ Tsar Peter's borrowings intended to establish Russia as an advanced European country find expression in Stalin's time in the

²² Massie, *Peter the Great*, 811.

²³ Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 12.

1930s revival of the interest in Western culture known as the Great Appropriation. In building up its modern image, Moscow had appropriated vastly, like Tsar Peter in his days, from those cultures. In one of the most blatant expressions of this aspect related in Katerina Clark's *Moscow, The Fourth Rome*, Boris Iofan, the chief Soviet architect of the 1930 and designer of the Palace of Soviets in Moscow, stated in *Pravda* after a trip to New York, Chicago, Rome and Berlin in 1935: "wherever I might travel, whatever I might see, I approached everything from a particular point of view: what of all this has to be taken home to the Soviet Union."²⁴

The corollary of this plan "to civilize Russia," which is also the putative conflict of the play, becomes soon apparent. Working behind the scenes, his "most skilled agents," Shalyapin and Smirnov, are on a mission to find the philosopher Pierre de la Manque, whose brain Peter wishes to pick in trying to find out how he "can change the Russian people." After accidentally stumbling into de la Manque, Peter becomes very unhappy with the cynic philosopher's stubborn proclamations that "Russia is an unhealthily big country,"²⁵ that nothing can be done to change Russia and Russians, and that the tsar would not be able to lead the Russians as he does should they be able to change. Infuriated by de la Manque's crude evaluations, which are uncontestable even to the tsar, Peter orders his courtiers to murder him because, as Tsar of all Russians, Peter does not want such dangerous assessments of his people, and of himself as supreme Majesty, to be known. The final encounter between Peter, the Russian tsar, and Pierre, the French philosopher, insinuates that Pierre is Peter's alter ego, that the two men are, in the tsar's words, "like two peas in a pod... . We are brothers."²⁶ Faced with a definite understanding that Russians will not change, Peter acts out an imaginary punishment and justifies his orders to have Pierre murdered with the chilling remark, "God has entrusted me with a mission. A very important mission." To the tsar's question, "Can you hear the voice of God?" Pierre responds with the lucid remark "It's the wind."²⁷ It would have been difficult for a philosopher of the French Enlightenment to comprehend the tsar's sense of self-directed divinity.

²⁴ Clark, *Moscow*, 8.

²⁵ Zografi, *Kiss Me*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

In the exchange that literalizes in Zografi's play the tsar's alleged power and, through extension, that of Stalin, Peter's murder of La Manque at the hands of his loyal courtiers bears all the marks of Stalin's treatment of those he perceived to be dangerous. Like Tsar Peter, who tells Pierre that "Russia is too big to take risks" and therefore the enlightened Pierre must die, Stalin always murdered those he perceived to be dangerous. It was a lesson the Man of Steel had learned early enough in the game of power. Roughly 200 years after Peter's visit to Paris in 1918, when the Bolsheviks were struggling for survival, Lenin deployed Stalin to Tsaritsyn, the key strategic city on the lower Volga, the gateway to the grain and oil of the North Caucasus, and the southerly key to Moscow, which was in danger of falling to the Whites. Stalin showed he meant business by shooting any suspects or counter-revolutionaries in the city. During those days, as an answer to Trotsky, whom Stalin considered "an operetta commander, a chatter box," Stalin is reputed to have also said: "Death solves all problems. No man, no problem." This simply was Stalin's way, as attested in more recent accounts like Simon Sebag Montefiore's *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (2003), a book which details the horrors of Stalinism beyond the Gulag, complete with Beria's yearly quota of 75,950 executions in the early 1930s (later raised) and the beating to death of the teenage children belonging to Stalin's political foes, coupled with the torture of widows by placing snakes in their prison cells.

Clothed in fictional referentiality, the brutal murder of de la Manque in Zografi's play reveals Peter's criminal streak that the tsar himself casually acknowledges when he tells Shalyapin that he has "treaded on mountains of corpses. Sometimes I ... with my own hand."²⁸ De la Manque's murder saddens Peter's jester, Nikita Zotov, a character patterned after the real Nikita Zotov, a clerk in the tax-collection department of Tsar Fedor, Peter's half-brother, appointed as tutor to the five-year old Peter by his widowed mother, Tsaritsa Natalya Naryshkina. (There is a slight discrepancy in the play, with Zotov saying that he's known Peter since the boy was ten.)

Zografi's play features Zotov as a jester, a likable pope-prince who is often asked to pose as the tsar, in keeping with the Russian tradition of the Holy Fool embodying the voice of conscience. The historical Nikita Zotov was an amiable, literate man whom Peter kept close for as long as the tutor lived.

²⁸ Ibid., 74.

Although not a scholar, Zotov taught Peter the alphabet, the Bible (which the future tsar could still recite by heart forty years later), and above all prepared his young pupil to be open and curious—in short, to grow into the self-taught man that Peter was to become as a Tsar.

In credible fashion given the historical Peter's relationship with Zotov, Peter turns to Zotov, the only man he trusts in the play, to express his horror at discovering spots in the sun with the telescope the French academicians allow him to use. The discovery of the "shameful disease of the sun" forces Peter to see that not only are Russians backward in relation to the West's advanced sciences, but also that their deep-seated belief in the greatness of their tsar, associated in Russian proverbs with the perfection of a glorious and eternal sun, is severely challenged and undermined. For, as Peter acknowledges when he remarks in horror that "if this sun dies, we pass away too, we'll conk like a pack of rats,"²⁹ if the sun is imperfect and subject to extinction, so are the tsar and his unlimited power.

The close cultural association of the tsar with the sun is signaled in state documents and in proverbs, to which—according to Peter's spy, Shalyapin's contemptuous comment in the play—"Russians cling." Before Peter's time, the embassy of Englishmen sent to Russia in 1664 to thank Peter's father, Tsar Alexis, for his constant support of the once-exiled monarch, Charles II, captures this august figure as remote and forever inaccessible to his subjects in his splendid magnificence:

The Tsar like a sparkling sun darted forth most sumptuous rays, being most magnificently placed upon his throne, with his scepter in hand and having his crown on his head. His throne was of massy silver gilt, wrought curiously on top with several works and pyramids; and being seven or eight steps higher than the floor, it rendered the person of the Prince transcendently majestic.³⁰

A few centuries later, in the USSR, Stalin was perceived in similar ways as the sky's most luminous globe, a notion most Soviets embraced, especially

²⁹ Ibid., 70.

³⁰ Massie, *Peter the Great*, 9.

since it had been immortalized in Mikhail Isakovski's "Song of Stalin."³¹ Written in 1936, at the height of Stalin's autocracy, the popular lines of a Russian poet, a two-time laureate of USSR State Prizes (1943, 1949), and a Hero of Socialist Labor (1970), proclaimed the heavenly power of Stalin, the Sun-trusted leader:

And strength and youth and glory / He gave us for eternal time/
He kindled bright spring sunrises / Over our homesteads./
Comrades, we sing a song / To that most trusted man/
Of the sun, the truth of peoples, / Of Stalin we sing a song.

From times immemorial, proverbs like "One sun shines in heaven and the Russian tsar on earth" teach Russians to regard their ruler as a god-like or sun-like creature from infancy. The rhetoric of proverbs ("Only God and the tsar know," "Through God and the tsar, Russia is strong") also indicate the tsar's influence and authority and relate the Russians' feeling for the tsar and for their land. In a sense, long before communism, the Russian land was communal. It belonged to the tsar as father, but also to the people, his family, as in "The sovereign is the father, the earth the mother." The ruler was the tsar who could dispose of Russia's riches, yet the country remained the joint property of the national family. The tsar, in this familial scheme, was the father, and his autocratic rule was patriarchal. He had unlimited power over his subjects, the same as a father has over his children, and the Russian people could not have imagined any limitation of the tsar's power that, as the proverbs show, seemed to seep in unnoticeably and to manifest itself psychologically.

Throughout the play the spies' fear of and servile attitude toward Peter, as well as their interactions with the French court, reveal moral, social, and cultural characteristics of the Russians, a true and eternal people Peter and later Stalin ruled autocratically. There were agents everywhere in Peter's Russia, watching and listening, reporting to the tsar any "violent and unseemly speech." This practice reached its apogee in 1702, when Peter created the Secret Office, with jurisdiction over all crimes and especially

³¹ Prokhorov, Alexander, ed. *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1974–83).

treason by “word or deed.” Any suggestion of treason or rebellion was immediately reported through a network of pervasive eavesdropping and denunciation, followed by torture and execution of the suspects, a system foreshadowing in every way Stalin’s NKVD and the terror of the Gulag and Lubianka.³²

Unlike Westerners engaged in Peter’s time in the advancing sciences and the formulation of democratic principles through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, Russia, her church, and her rulers remained pure and petrified in their primeval past. The weight and strain of this cultural backwardness began to take its toll on Russian society, as later in the twentieth century Stalin’s suspicion toward foreigners and the West reflected the nation’s collective sentiment and the Soviet people’s acceptance of a rule of the land that offered little satisfaction and allowed for no democratic institutions, an unconditional acceptance of a political and social oppression that appealed to them in ways more powerful than rebellious logic and cold reasoning.

Russians bowed unconditionally to the ritual, dogma, and practices of Russian Orthodoxy, emancipated from the primacy of Constantinople in 1589, when the office of the first Patriarch of Moscow was created. Moscow and Russia had thus early on achieved independence—and isolation. Confronted in the south by the Islamic Turks and Tartars, in the north by Lutheran Sweden, and in the west by Catholic Poland from whom Peter’s grandfather had snatched the city of Kiev and Ukraine, the Russian Church adopted and in turn disseminated a defensive stance of xenophobic conservatism. All change became abhorrent, and huge energies were devoted to the exclusion of foreign influences and scientific thought.

Aware of the collective power of the church reproduced in all the Russians who made themselves subject to it, Peter fought to subordinate the church to the state and promoted those supporting his political objectives to the clergy, making it subject to the tsar’s power like the army, the civil administration or artisans. Ultimately, Peter abolished the one-man rule of the Patriarch and replaced it with a collective administration, the Holy Synod abiding by the Ecclesiastical Regulations. By abolishing the

³² Further testimony to this practice in more recent times can be found in Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*.

Patriarchate and transforming the administration of the church into a branch of the secular government, Peter could finally rule over Russia as an absolute monarch, whose power was given to him by God.

Deeply ingrained in the Russian soul, Christianity defined in the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18), as determined and exemplified by St. Augustine,³³ united the Orthodox Russians by mutual identification grounded in the reflexivity of self-love. It is, however, the imperative of this interpretation against the incommensurability of the injunction’s three basic terms, the neighbor, self, and love that receives special attention in the writings of Emanuel Levinas. In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*,³⁴ Levinas reformulates the Biblical call to neighbor-love as the insistence on a relation to the other that antedates the very being of the subject. The neighbor names the occasion of an originary responsibility that precedes both the subject who assumes that obligation and the community in which responsibility will be represented. In a 1982 interview Levinas comments that “responsibility for the neighbor” is doubtless “the strict term for that which is called the love of the neighbor,”³⁵ insofar as both are defined by an ability to respond to the other that is not predicated on the experience of self-love (as in St. Augustine) but is rather the precondition of the self. Levinas argues that the subject as such (in this case the tsar) is “called into being,” finding itself obsessed with its neighbor (the Russians):

The neighbor (Russians) concerns the tsar before all assumption, all commitment, consented or refused. Russians are bound to him, their tsar, who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled; I, the tsar, am bound to the Russians, before any liaison, contracted... . Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, “against all logic.” It is not because the Russians would be recognized as belonging to the same

³³ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

³⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* [*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*] (Paris: Kluwer Academic, 1974).

³⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre nous: essays sur le penser-à-l'autre* [*Between us: essays on thinking about the other*] (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 113.

genius as the tsar that they concern him. He, the tsar, is precisely *other*. The community with the tsar begins in the Russians' obligation to him.³⁶

Interpreting such lines in terms of Russian Orthodoxy, the subjects'—that is the tsar's—responsibility for the people, the Russians, as his neighbor forms the basis of their community. In this context, the subject, who is the tsar, or later Stalin, becomes an integral and absolute ego individual, unique, and irreplaceable, whose business is the absolute. No one can substitute himself for the tsar, who substitutes himself for all.

Further, the uniqueness of the tsar as self lies not in his identity, but in the singularity and infinity of his responsibility to this people. No one can replace him in his obligation to his neighbor/his people. Moreover, because this responsibility is singular and not transferable, it can never be reciprocal; the tsar has one more obligation than anyone else insofar as he is not only responsible for the neighbor, the Russians, but also responsible for *the others/Russians*.

These observations make a lot of sense in the context of de la Manque's assessment in the play of Russians as a people who cannot change and thus can only be ruled. In "The Pact," Levinas renders the injunction to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" as "Be responsible for the other as you are responsible for yourself," a formulation that reverses and upsets the reflexive arc implied by the verse's Augustinian translation.³⁷ Whereas love of the neighbor circles from subject to the other and back, responsibility for the neighbor may originate in love or *as a traumatic response to the other*; the relationship between self and neighbor is reciprocal but not symmetrical. The trauma of asymmetry may also take religion as its defense mechanism.

Further, despite the structures of social representations attempting to establish "reciprocal relations" of the Russians with the tsar, the tsar assumes a responsibility for the Russians that is not mutual, that cannot be amortized, and that is in fact infinitely asymmetrical. As supreme ruler, with divine rights, the more he answers, the more he is responsible; the more he approaches the Russians with which he is encharged, the farther away he is. Lastly, his responsibility for the Russians cannot reciprocally entail their

³⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 87.

³⁷ Emanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 84.

responsibility for him. Conversely, for the tsar to require the Russians to indebt themselves to him would be to ask for human sacrifice—hence the expectation, in the deferred spatiality and temporality of the play, to die for the tsar by choosing to follow the presumed expectations of the all-pervasive tsarist power aimed. In time, the Russian tsars' absolutist power led to the slow destruction of the Russians' resistance and self-worth vis-à-vis the god-like ruler's self-assertion and commands. Turned into a country with a command-and-obedience system, where the only agency is that of autocratic rule and where no provisions are made for democratic governance or religious stewardship, Russia became in the days of the Soviet Union an empire that Stalin could control brutally, unconditionally, and with a sense of divine mission.

VIII.

Inserting God into the Communist Personality Cult: Stefan Tsanev's *The Other Death of Joan of Arc*

Stefan Tsanev's *The Other Death of Joan of Arc*³⁸—a play that proposes a multilevel political and theatrical riddle as well as a satirical comment on Marxist-Leninist ideology in the Stalinist era—was staged exactly at the time of the grand collapse of communism in Bulgaria, within a year from the fall of the Berlin Wall. Premiered in 1991 in Sofia, *The Other Death of Joan of Arc* has been performed more than 300 times in more than twelve theaters in Bulgaria. Outside Bulgaria it has been performed in Pittsburgh and Montreal (in 1993); Warsaw, Bratislava, and Moscow (in 1995); Niš (Yugoslavia, in 1996); Giurgiu (Romania), Murmansk (Russia), and Athens (in 2004); Cluj (Romania) and Istanbul (in 2005).

Unlike Matéi Vişniec's *Jeanne et le Feu* (2007), which is a close rewrite of the story of Joan of Arc filled with dark humor and irony, Tsanev's play is primarily an instrument to condemn Bulgaria's unconditional submission to Moscow and to the dictates of Marxism-Leninism brought to the country in 1945 through the steadfast and consistent work of Georgi Dimitrov. Dimitrov was a Bulgarian-born educated Marxist and prominent theorist, who translated into practice many of Lenin's ideological, political, tactical, and organizational principles meant to mold Bulgaria in the Soviet Union's image. Following the Kremlin-dictated model, Bulgarian society was restructured as the country had to undergo forced industrialization, collectivization, and a reinforced obedience to the Party discipline, secret police operations, and the terrifying purges for failing to kowtow to the Stalinist practices. In 1949, for instance, the Bulgarian deputy premier

³⁸ Stefan Tsanev, "The Other Death of Joan of Arc," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 8, no. 2 (1998): 29–61.

Kostov, who had protested against the terms of trade between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, which had been selling Bulgarian rose oil at three times the price they had paid for it, was sentenced to death on charges that included the adoption of “an insincere and unfriendly policy towards the Soviet Union.”

This political culture, complete with purges and show-trials, borrowed as much from Bulgaria’s Christian practices that were well steeped in the Orthodoxy of an old Byzantium as from Marx and Stalin. In fact, as Philip Longworth argues convincingly, “the Party was an analogue of the church and it was pronouncing anathema on its heretics.”³⁹ Images of Stalin seen as the Caring Liberator after World War II were everywhere, competing in number of displays with the religious icons or the portraits of Byzantine patriarchs in former ages. In this context, it is relevant to note that communists in Bulgaria, as well as in the rest of the Soviet bloc, engaged in a sustained effort to suppress religion as a culmination of their struggles between church and state, with the masses merely confused by their respective vocabularies and displays that were virtually interchangeable. Sharing the same Orthodox population as Russia, Bulgaria tended to look to Russia, which was always an exponent of governmental absolutism, as its protector.

According to an eminent Hungarian historian, Russia’s absolutism provided the framework within which all change had to be contained. As the communist Soviet Union asserted its dominance over the Orthodox Church, much like Peter the Great did in his time, the Russian state claimed, in effect, to possess a monopoly of truth and moral authority reinforced by a society frozen in its practices and perpetually confusing state and church. In this absolutist political culture, especially in the Orthodox countries of the Soviet bloc like Romania and Bulgaria where society and church were confused with one another, there was a strong tendency to associate moral and political consideration. Political dissenters had to be confronted and punished by normative moral regulations reinforced by the traditions of the Orthodox Church.

In Bulgaria’s less mobile society, the confusion brought along by reinforced Stalinism continued steadily even after Dimitrov’s death in 1954. His successor, Todor Zhivkov, followed loyally Dimitrov’s example, by main-

³⁹ Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe*, 87.

taining the Soviet-style regime that carried the seal of Kremlin approval. Even after Gorbachev's reformist speeches, Zhivkov presided over a stalled version of glasnost and perestroika that did not allow independent associations to engage in what the old communist guard perceived as anarchy, chaos or any type of challenge to communist ideology. His regime cracked down on the Club for the Support of Perestroika and Glasnost, formed in November 1988 by a group of about one hundred prominent intellectuals, and its leaders were promptly arrested and expelled from the Bulgarian Communist Party. In related events, grassroots demands for a more open press which the leadership labeled cautiously as "socialist pluralism of opinion" led to the firing of three Bulgarian editors for promoting "negative views" of communism.⁴⁰ A theatrical production of the time, the play *Balkan Syndrome*, which staged a veiled comment on the rigors of life under communism, did not dare to go beyond a pale protest. A play within a play, focusing on a theatrical director who is fired in mid-rehearsal for letting people ask too many questions, *Balkan Syndrome* offered the sort of political opposition Bulgakov had staged as early as 1927 in his *Crimson Island* in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, for a brief moment, it looked like Bulgaria was in an impossibly early stage of political protest.

Discussing the contrast between Moscow and Sofia, a Bulgarian intellectual explained that "What makes the Soviet cultural scene so much more lively than ours is that journalists, historians, playwrights, and filmmakers are free to expose the dark side of the Stalin and Brezhnev years. In our case, unfortunately, Zhivkov is the past, the present, and possibly also the future. He alone can be blamed for the state of our country after more than thirty-five years in power, and that is strictly forbidden."⁴¹ When Zhivkov's long and rigidly Stalinist rule ended abruptly on November 10, 1989 and the political monopoly of the communist Party was abolished within the following month, Bulgaria's extraordinary and sudden departure from its past was all the more remarkable in light of the country's historic relationship with the Soviet Union. The time was ripe for intellectuals and playwrights like Tsanev, who have suffered systematic persecution since the final days of World War II, to become actively involved.

⁴⁰ For detailed information on the period, see Eli Abel, *The Shattered Bloc: Behind the Upheaval in Eastern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

As communist regimes collapsed, Tsanev appeared ready to look at the ruins of Bulgaria, fueled by the secret desire to have the rotten core of what Dimitrov considered the life-giving light of Marxism-Leninism projected on stage and satirically encapsulated into a grand narrative of the past: the medieval story of Joan of Arc, the celebrated heroine who achieved sainthood after she inspired the deliverance of Orleans and led the dauphin Charles to Reims for his anointing and coronation, a turning point which weakened decisively the claims of the English boy king Henry VI. Even though the irritated leaders of the English alliance engineered Joan's death at the stake in Rouen on May 30, 1431, they would not reverse the French military recovery she had started. The Hundred Years War ended with nearly complete expulsion of the English from French soil in 1453, another date that resonated, on Tsanev's side of Europe, with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks that same year and the subsequently accelerated decline of the Orthodox Church and the old Byzantine world. The latter was an informal cultural empire that included Russia and the Balkans and in which Bulgaria had once played an integral role. In the early fourteenth century Bulgaria was an independent state under the rule of Michael Sisman, a ruler who, after adopting elements of Byzantine court ceremonial, wore a crown modelled on a Byzantine diadem and a purple robe before his defeat by the Serbs in 1330, the last year of independent statehood for Bulgaria until the nineteenth century.

Notably however, even though the great city of Byzantium lost its former wealth and glory as the center of a vast empire after being conquered by the Turks, the Orthodox Church continued to wield its great spiritual and patriarchal influence far afield in countries like Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia, whose isolated and imbalanced societies of predominantly peasant classes became the bases for the region's modern states. The crucially historical 1453, in the association with Joan of Arc's sacrifice, is Tsanev's clever theatrical allusion to the year that efficiently deepened the differences brought along by the 1045 schism between the European West (more entrepreneurial, economically prosperous, and predominantly Catholic) and East (filled with icons, the flowing robes of the Orthodox monks, and absolutist systems). Such history makes Bulgaria's dramatic embrace of Stalinism not only a foretold moment, but also a humorously confusing situation, even for God. The burning at the stake of Joan of Arc and the

practices of a politically motivated Catholic Church can be regarded as an *avant la lettre* staging of a Bulgaria frozen in a time-warped zone of Orthodox practices reenacted by an assertive Stalinism.

Ensuring the dramatic framing of Tsanev's play, Joan of Arc's unjust imprisonment, trial and death—that had catalyzed support for the Valois cause and had become an issue of national patriotism—link the dramatic fate of occupied France to the real-world context that fuels the drama of contemporary Bulgaria in the early 1990s. This includes the pain of forty-five years of communism and the popular resistance to Bulgaria's political submission to Soviet hegemony, for nine years under Dimitrov and another thirty-five under Zhivkov.

According to A. I. Sobolev, as early as the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Bulgaria ranked fourth in the world for the amount of published works by Marx and Engels.⁴² One of the most prominent Marxists, Dimitar Blagoev, was active in instilling the foundations of Marxist teaching in the young fighters for the cause of the working class, like Dimitrov. When the works of Marx and Engels were further developed in Russia, where a party of the new type of revolutionary, the Leninist type, was formed to wage the communist struggle, Dimitrov became a quick comrade-in-arms in the first stage of his political engagement, between 1917 and 1923. Inspired by the aftermath of the October Revolution, Dimitrov was instrumental in changing the name of the Bulgarian Left-wing Socialists, who in 1919 became communists and changed the name of their party calling it a communist Party. Its agenda was centered primarily on promoting friendship with the Soviet State. Expressing his admiration for Lenin's genius and the great success of the Bolsheviks, Dimitrov declared in the autumn of 1918: "The dawn of Russia is pouring its light over the whole of Europe. It will also come to us. We are already feeling its first rays ... The tide of socialism, of the proletarian revolution, is overwhelming our class enemies and their friends. Holding tight, hand in hand with the world proletariat, we shall win!"⁴³

⁴² A.I. Sobolev, "Georgi Dimitrov: Outstanding Militant and Theorist of the Comintern," in *Georgi Dimitrov, an Outstanding Militant of the Comintern* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 19–20.

⁴³ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. V (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 157–59.

After emigrating from Bulgaria, Dimitrov entered the second stage of his political activism as an émigré, between 1924 and 1934, mainly in Western and Central Europe. During the next decade, Dimitrov lived officially in the Soviet Union as a Soviet citizen, heading the communist International and being totally devoted to Stalin. The fourth stage of his political career that began with the victory of the socialist revolution in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944 and lasted until his last hour, marked the end of a career that spanned more than thirty years. Throughout that time, no matter where he happened to be living and in what conditions he was working, Dimitrov always praised the Soviet Union as “a steadfast guard of peace, democracy and progress” and “undisputed pillar” of human progress. After the Second World War, more enthusiastic than ever, Dimitrov stated that “without the Soviet Union there is and there cannot be any freedom and independence for the nations.”⁴⁴ Just as the Grand Dukes of Moscow regarded themselves as continuators of the Byzantine emperors and heritage after the fall of Constantinople, in modern times Moscow was sending enthusiastic envoys like Dimitrov to preach the influence and power of the Stalinism in the Soviet bloc. Moscow’s sense of destiny, which began as early as the fifteenth century, not simply as heir to Byzantium but as the center of a future universal empire, was resurrected in Dimitrov’s admonition and wielded through the Soviets’ occupation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Given the long-standing prominence of the Orthodox Church in the Byzantine-Russian-communist Eastern Europe connection, a discussion of Tsanev’s play could begin with an initial consideration of Marxism and Leninism, and more specifically with its emphasis on radical social transformation that eliminated not only the class distinctions but also the old order that placed God at the center of creation. After hailing the victory of the October Revolution, the communists advocated the categorical denial of God’s existence and the necessary annihilation of all religious sentiment or representation. For the Bolsheviks, God did not exist and faith was a sort of opium for the masses, as Marx famously theorized, so that they could be better exploited. Since God did not exist in the first place, as Marx and Engels had decreed, He had to be invented by the exploiters who could thus lure the ignorant working classes with the promises of an equally invisible

⁴⁴ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. XIV (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 303.

heaven that would become the home of the poor after a life of suffering, hard work and humble acceptance of one's fate on earth. For almost two thousand years, the guidance and constant love of this invisible God steered the faithful on the right path, with the great promise of eternal grace, if they followed His word and command.

After banishing God and religion, Marxist-Leninist ideology performed, however, a manipulation of the same kind. By copying and substituting the mighty metaphors and divine icons of religion, communism turned itself into the virtual body of words, images, slogans, figures and monumental packaging, fueling an ideologically visionary complex that wrapped up no real world. It was certainly a trick that a former seminarian like Stalin could easily perform in the Soviet Union. Like the unseen God, who wraps Himself up in His Creation to become visible, communist ideology wrapped itself up into the otherwise invisible communist world of empty rhetoric and proletarian clichés that make the body of ideology distinct and visible.

With its legitimacy enforced by the Bolshevik Revolution, communism manufactured a dense reality that authorized itself in the outfits of the slogans. Its ideology, like religious doctrine, could not be divorced from the material reality of the sign: the hammer and the sickle, corresponding to the blacksmith and the reaper, and conducting the pulsation of life and death for the working classes; or the five-pointed star, a primal indivisible symbolic device, composed by a single unbroken move of the hand drawing a line that locks together a figure which cannot be disassembled and whose utmost consolidation of geometry, ultimate in meaning and wonderful in fashion, is like that of God's creation.⁴⁵

Moreover, the founding fathers of communism, Marx and Lenin, became the new objects of communist idolatry and their teachings illuminated the way of political actions and the revolutionary Bolshevik world. Dimitrov's reverence for Lenin expressed as early as 1919 in the "Foreword" to Lenin's two open letters *"To the Workers of Europe and America"*⁴⁶ professes his utmost admiration of Lenin's genius and reiterates the full agreement of

⁴⁵ For much of this terminology and incisive vocabulary I am indebted to Vladislav Todorov's excellent discussion in *Red Square, Black Square* (Albany: States University of New York Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 28, 4th English Edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 453–77.

Bulgarian Marxists with Lenin's ideas that were embraced as their new religion. "His name," wrote Dimitrov about Lenin, "has grown into a symbol of the world working class revolution, which has triumphed in Russia, swept over Hungary, shaken Germany and which is spreading, to encompass the entire capitalist world. That is why everything that Lenin wrote and said today assumes tremendous importance for the militant proletariat of all countries."⁴⁷

When the Party doctrine was overthrown after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world of communism instantly disappeared in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the masses from Moscow to Berlin, through Bucharest, Budapest, and Sofia alongside the other communist capitals, found themselves lined up and staring at a void reality that ideology alone had created: the militant slogans, the potent symbols, and the melancholy emblems of communism. As the elaborated ideological vision of the Soviet Union and the countries of the Stalinist bloc withered away leaving in its aftermath a pitiable reality, the wrecked ideology opened up holes through which a raggedy God, not unlike the one descending on Joan's cell in Tsanev's play, could peep to see the monstrous communist world and then weep. The would-be workers' paradise was in fact a radical materialization of terror, whose figures were slowly released to the world into the grand public space, replete with macabre imagery, and organized around the ultimate sign of the Party conspiratorial consciousness—the mummy of Lenin in Moscow's Red Square, near the Kremlin, the headquarters of Soviet power, and the mummified body of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia, Bulgaria, the country that had adopted most closely the dictates of Soviet Russia.

In Moscow and Sofia, Lenin's and Dimitrov's mummies were the carnal not spiritual representation of the unfathomable Ruler and Father of the Soviet and Bulgarian Bolshevism. Bearing further testimony to the usurpation of the Christian congregation and religious power by the Party and its ideological power, and further replacing the powerful values, metaphors and sacramental attributes of the age-old tradition with the tangible metaphors and attributes of Marxism-Leninism, the new religion identified itself in terms of a new Party that demolished the old tradition

⁴⁷ Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. V, 157–59.

and usurped the public space with new slogans. The new ideology championed radical change of the social order, after incorporating the previous divine/Byzantine decorum revamped with the new deities of the proletariat.

Like Lenin's mummy exposed as the ultimate ideological sign, Dimitrov's embalmed body perpetuated for the Bulgarians the omnipresent Party power and the Party plot for seizing and controlling power by detecting and punishing traitors, those who failed to see that the Soviet Union was the touchstone of proletarian internationalism and the beacon of communism. Dimitrov's mummy closely wrapped around Zhivkov's leadership, which took over as the new communist savior calling for a new social order established outside religious tradition and subservient to Moscow, is subversively at the core of Tsanev's *The Other Death of Joan of Arc*, a play that stages a disoriented God visiting a country he cannot easily identify or place in time. Called upon by an imprisoned woman whose shorn head and soldier's chain shirt suggest a repentant Joan of Arc in a dungeon of medieval France, Tsanev's God drifts humorously by entertaining theatrically the notion of being in Bulgaria, instead of France, at a time when the country, under its Moscow-dictated leadership, was in a situation loosely parallel with that of France in the final phase of the Hundred Years War.

Having allied themselves with the English, powerful French lords and Catholic Church leaders betrayed their Valois king, Charles VII, thus making an English conquest of France inevitable, if not for Joan of Arc's heroic intervention. Among the French who fought against their own country for the glory of the King of England were primarily Pierre Cauchon, bishop of Beauvais and Joan of Arc's tireless prosecutor, and Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, a most ambitious feudal lord, who performed the coronation of Henry VI at Paris, in December 1431, six months after he had ordered Joan's ashes to be collected and thrown into the Seine so that no relic could be claimed later. Both Cauchon and Warwick are mentioned in Tsanev's play, at the top of a list of names Joan invokes in prison that belong to real-world people involved in the powerful intrigues behind Joan's arrest, trial, and execution carried through 1429 to May 1431.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ An excellent source of information on Joan of Arc's life and details with transcripts of her trial is Regine Pernoud and Marie Veronique Clin's *Joan of Arc: Her Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

The wooden crucifix featured prominently next to Joan's bed in the solitary cell of Tsanev's play is a powerful reminder that Joan of Arc's prosecution reflected the conflation of ideology with politics and religion, in the sense that she was an archetypal political prisoner and not a deliberate heretic, persecuted because she threatened and annoyed her captors and their ideology and political ambitions. Of added importance in the examination of her fate within Tsanev's play is her Christian mission, her status as a saint, given the conviction among the common folks of France and some neighboring countries that the Maid—*Jeanne la Pucelle*, as Joan of Arc called herself in praise of her chastity—was saving them from the endless and pitiless Hundred Years War. For them, Joan's mission of being sent by God to restore the French king to his country ravaged by the English seemed entirely valid in larger spiritual terms, just like, for audiences of modern times, her reiterated sacrificial defiance in Tsanev's play is something of a model of popular resistance to political aggression of the type practiced by Bolshevik Russia in the Soviet bloc. After all, it was not a trivial similarity that communism came to Bulgaria by force of alien arms rather than by social revolution, in ways similar to the manner in which the English marched into France in the 1400s. Few of Tsanev's generation could forget that with Hitler's armies in strategic retreat during the final months of World War II, Soviet forces came and stayed, to occupy the whole of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria (in addition to Poland and parts of Germany), and that the political control of these countries was exercised through the installation of Soviet-style regimes under Moscow-trained and educated leaders like Dimitrov, and later Zhivkov, in Bulgaria.

As the play begins, an agitated Joan is rehearsing in her dungeon cell an apology to the Catholic Church and high dignitaries, a text she is preparing to enunciate publicly later on, in exchange for her life. As it turns out, in Tsanev's play the woman is not Joan of Arc, the Maid who, in the play's imaginary plot, is already dead in some trench of a battlefield near Compiègne, where she was fighting for the liberation of Paris. Rather, she is the prostitute Janette La Jolly, used as a stand-in for the maiden soldier by the hypocritical and power-hungry church elders who are mere puppets of the English masters and who are trying to discredit Joan of Arc and the French king she led into the fight to defeat the English. From the fine allusions that are cleverly inserted in the play it is quite obvious that Tsanev

is all-too-familiar with the details of the real-world Joan of Arc's life, including her capture at Compiègne by Lionel Bastard of Wandomme's six men-at-arms and sixty-two yeomen, the sordid details of her being ransomed for 10,000 crowns before being delivered to the English, and her subsequent imprisonment, trial, and execution spearheaded by Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais. But he is inserting this change in order to write his own subversive play, which uses the story of Joan of Arc to dramatize the selling of Bulgaria to the Soviets by its own native sons and to inspire the people of Bulgaria with the Maid's courageous fight.

To save herself from being burnt at the stake, the putative Joan in Tsanev's play needs to deny the just cause of Joan of Arc and thus bring dishonor not only on the Maid's heroic fight but also on the King of France, Charles VII who had regained the throne of France through her brave intercession. While decoding the young woman's torment and fear over her impending death, Tsanev's play examines the medieval past of political betrayals and ideological alliances when France, sold out by her own people, was politically dominated by England, a situation loosely parallel to the space of communist Bulgaria where the likes of Dimitrov and Zhivkov carried out the political transformations imposed by the Soviet Union. Another death of Joan of Arc in modern time would mean an affirmation of the Bulgarian people's collective will to put an end to the oppressive Marxist-Leninist era and liberate their country from communism.

The play's only setting, the ruined and sordid cell kept under constant surveillance, appears as "one big ear"⁴⁹ and suggests Bulgaria as an ugly embryo of paranoid totalitarianism, a space forgotten by a banished God who complains that He was "made to look bad by the nomenklatura."⁵⁰ Here the putative Joan rehearses catch phrases of contrition that echo the twisted linguistic devices of a communist self-criticism to save herself from the horrible death lying in store for her, unless she denies her fighting spirit and hatred for the English occupation of France, understood to be communist Bulgaria. Transforming the cell into an arena for death, the figure of the Executioner is emblematic of the average Bulgarian, fickle and brutal, allowing for the atrocities carried out by the occupiers. As his interventions

⁴⁹ Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

on stage cut to the very quick of Bulgaria's humiliating social scene, the Executioner's ugly body and contortion of facial features cast the shadow of communism on stage to reflect the lethal agony of an entire disfigured country.

The Other Death of Joan d'Arc incarnates the communist specter extended beyond Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the Red Tsar's crimes in 1956. In the space of communist Bulgaria, Dimitrov's servile admiration of Soviet communism acquired further authority in the actions and pronouncements of Zhivkhov, his follower, who lacked the popular support to carry out the draconic communist directives, especially after Khrushchev's denunciations. An equally pliant leader to the Soviet Union's dictates, Zhivkov followed Dimitrov's example loyally through the next three decades when Marxist-Leninist ideology continued to be emphatically embraced as state-religion: in Bulgaria's most remote locations classrooms walls were adorned with the portraits of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the trinity of the founding fathers of communism that was meant to induce in the hearts of children the same perpetual adoration that was shown to the Holy Trinity in precommunist Bulgaria by a powerful Orthodox Church.

Ideological manipulators of the Soviet Union had little new to teach a patriarchal Orthodox Church that had created a distinctive mind-set in Russia and the Orthodox space where countries like Bulgaria found it difficult to absorb humanist ideas, but relatively easy to inhale the mystic tendencies and popular hatred inherited from Byzantium. Such tendencies, which had successfully bred politically absolutist structures, now suffered an alteration in kind in the countries of Eastern Europe, where people were forced to renounce religious foundational beliefs and appropriate instead the teachings of the three great leaders, Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, while nurturing Stalinism as another religion.

Echoing humorously the play's conflation of Stalinist politics and religion occasionally adapted to suit Catholic elements befitting France in Joan of Arc's time, the Executioner appears in the play's "Prologue" seated on a wooden prison bed, "playing with the links of a heavy chain as if they were rosary beads" (3), and elaborating over rudimentary religion that legitimated human practices and interactions in precommunist days. His coarse, and unwittingly humorous, interpretation of each of the Ten Commandments

is filtered through the practices and inequities of the communist state. Here are a few samples:

“I am the Lord thy God; Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Not very liberal, our leader...

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” Yes, sir! That’s what I call a master! None of that pluralism, or whatever you call it ...

“Thou shalt not kill.” Obviously this one doesn’t apply for executioners. Move on!

“Thou shalt not steal.” Here we have had it, all of us ...

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Now that’s daft. I mean, if I were to obey this commandment, then who do I put on the stake tomorrow? Obviously it wouldn’t be the girl, it would have to be them, her judges and prosecutors ... (*He pulls himself up, glances around, listens, crosses himself in fear*).⁵¹

Fortified in his constant violation of principles of integrity by the artful manipulations practiced in a police state understood to be communist Bulgaria, the Executioner reckons, with cynical egotism, that “someone must have been making amendments over the commandments”⁵² because he has special dispensation to kill those perceived as enemies of the state, stealing is something that all people do, and bearing false witness against one’s neighbor is common practice.

In this veritable politics versus religion tour de force, Tsanev’s play features with expressive power its three personages that are paralleling humorously the divine Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost: Joan

⁵¹ Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

appears as the sacrificial Jesus, calling for God's help with the familiar supplication "My God, my God, why art thou forsaking me,"⁵³ the Executioner is a stand-in for the absent but all-too-real people of Bulgaria, and God makes a startling appearance as a raggedy and slightly confused old man, who claims to get frequent calls from the likes of Bush, Thatcher, Mitterand, and also Gorbachev. Alluding to the cruelty and godlessness of the unseen masters, God glances around the cell in fear that "they would crucify me too, if they got a hold of me"⁵⁴ and weeps impotently over the death of yet another innocent whose necessary sacrifice must restore the decayed and sinful condition of man fallen under communism. A putative Joan of Arc's other death would bring a sense of renewed honor and dignity to the people of Bulgaria, beyond the communist regime installed with Moscow's blessing and support.

Throughout the play, God's humorous interventions recommend him as a knowledgeable interlocutor, well aware of Bulgaria's raw history of foreign occupation both in the remote and in the more recent past. In quasi-historical crescendo, God learns that the time and place of his visit is 1431 France—the Middle Ages that He claims to dislike because of the abuses of the Inquisition, an ironic statement that brings to the fore Joan's brutal sentencing. As this is the 1400s, however, and God mistakes France for Bulgaria, He quickly assumes that the invaders Joan has been battling are the Turks—a jab that Tsanev's spectators can easily identify as Bulgaria's eternal complaint about the country's occupation by the Ottoman Empire shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, used invariably as an excuse for Bulgaria's inability to modernize in step with Western Europe. God's allusion to the Turks could also be perceived as a reminder to the audience of the constant persecution of Bulgaria's Turkish population in the Zhivkov era. Even in the aftermaths of Gorbachev's reforms to which Zhivkov paid only lip service after 1989, the leaders of the recently formed Independent Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Bulgaria were sent into internal exile without trial, an action that had prompted the association's secretary Tzeko Krustev Tzekov to condemn the suppression of Turkish-speaking citizens in a telephone interview with Radio Free Europe.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁵ Abel, *Shattered Bloc*, 156.

Alerted to Bulgaria's more immediate historical predicaments, Tsanev's God wants to know why the imprisoned woman is so worried over her impending death, "fussing over a small matter," as—according to Michael, a source God cites—"in the name of Marx, we finished off some 20 to 30 million Marxists."⁵⁶ Tsanev's double entendre is now turning into a biting, double-edged satire. In the first place, God could refer to St. Michael, the Archangel who appeared to the Maid in the first of the visions she had before the two saints, St. Catherine and St. Margaret, spoke to her, according to the transcripts of Joan of Arc's trial at Rouen. Here is an excerpt of Cauchon's questioning during her testimony of March 1, 1431 in which his repeated attempts to confound Joan with questions about sorcery are countered with her robust humor:⁵⁷

CAUCHON: What did St. Michael look like when he appeared to you? ... Was he naked?

JOAN: Do you think that God doesn't have the wherewithal to give him clothes?

CAUCHON: Did he have hair?

JOAN: Why would it have been cut off?

CAUCHON: Did he have a scale?

JOAN: I don't know anything about that. I have great joy when I see him.

In addition to the connection with the biblical Michael, which the real Joan of Arc's testimony implies and which very few in the audience could identify, God's reference in Tsanev's play can also target the other Michael, Mikhail Gorbachev, in an allusion which the audiences could clearly identify. In the twilight of the Evil Empire, Gorbachev condemned Marxist ideology while presiding over the disintegration of the Soviet Union and initiating reforms which Zhivkov's dutifully obeyed with short-lived and stunted political initiatives in the first days of the unraveling of the Stalinist bloc.

Though occasionally playful and cadenced to the rhythms of Joan's recorded testimonies during her trial in Rouen, the mood of Tsanev's play is primarily mournful. The cell and the Executioner, who is stopped from

⁵⁶ Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 15.

⁵⁷ Pernoud and Clin, *Joan of Arc*, 116.

raping the imprisoned woman only by God's divine intervention, pin down the gigantic exterior of the country outside the prison cell, likely to induce the spectators' melancholy at their country's loss of a Christian tradition that was swallowed by the communist propaganda machine and at their country's political takeover by the Soviet Russia. Tormented as she faces her impending death, Joan must decide "which is more sensible: to die rather than crawl—or to crawl but to go on living?"⁵⁸ In her rehearsed act of contrition, the "obedient people" of France and their "merciful masters," the English, are understood to be the people of Bulgaria, crawling in obedience to Soviet Russia, in accordance with the teachings and yearnings of Bulgaria's mummified communist leader, Georgi Dimitrov. In his role as an outstanding activist and militant of the communist movement Dimitrov confesses with the conviction of a convert, using Lenin's guidance and ideas to overcome the enemies of his own native country. "At every step," Dimitrov said in the words of a convert and devout follower, "I used the Leninist arsenal of weapons in the struggle ... I fought ... as a Bolshevik, since it is only the Bolshevik method, only Bolshevik heroism that can help us to fight and conquer precisely in that way ... I sought Lenin's advice in the course of many class struggles against the enemy in Bulgaria, I sought his counsel when I was in prison and I was fighting ... I seek Lenin's counsel every day, now, too, when the revolutionary liberation movement is extending and expanding more and more."⁵⁹

With what Kafka in *The Penal Colony* has called "the thin girdle of a plot," Tsanev features in the Kafka-esque trial space of *The Other Death of Joan of Arc* God's four humorous visitations in the cell that are interspaced with Janette's own references to the outside crowd awaiting her— 42 prosecutors, "the pride of learned Europe," and 120 justice-loving representatives "of the obedient people of France" playing to the music of their "merciful masters, the English."⁶⁰ Through Joan's invocation of the prosecutors during her rehearsed penance in the cell and the Executioner's engagement with the would-be Joan and God, Tsanev finds an ingenious way of staging a political commentary on the injustices and aberrations of an oppressive world: the medieval intrigues and power struggles of Joan of Arc's time are used to

⁵⁸ Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 8.

⁵⁹ Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, Vol. I (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972), 7.

⁶⁰ Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 2–3.

reflect in a theatrical palimpsest the reality of Bulgaria's own misfortunes during the Soviet era.

Further, with God talking about "this equality," the exchanges between Joan and God combine once again religion and politics by offering a humorous examination of Marxist ideology and church teachings that ends with a not-so-subtle invitation to see through the lies of communism:

JOAN: Some equality! Those that preach loudest about equality ... Bishop Cauchon—have you seen him all dressed up? The people barely cover themselves with rags, while he and his lot are decked out in tinsel and gold! The people barely have something to eat, while he and his lot are fattened up like pigs! But they keep intoning in church, and put in public: "Brothers and sisters, we are all equal!"—Equal, are we really? And have you seen their mansions? After that, how can one go on believing in them, or in their Lord!

GOD: However, there was Jesus ...

JOAN: What about Jesus?

GOD: He spoke about equality, but ... Do you remember him? ... The boy was following my example, even going barefoot.

JOAN: But no one seems to be following *his* example any more.

GOD: In their place, I wouldn't either. Wise people.

Joan: If they were wise, they wouldn't be so poor. I don't care if the well-fed don't believe the hungry. But if the hungry believe the well-fed, then they must be complete idiots.⁶¹

Of these dark times of church abuse in the history of France, the central figure is that of the Reverend Bishop Pierre Cauchon, the high prelate who pursued the real Joan of Arc with relentless hatred and whose life and activities could be interpreted to be a medieval approximation of Dimitrov's spirit. Through such deeds as his vote while a sixth-year student in theology in 1403 to ignore the orders of Pope Benedict XIII, Cauchon acquired lifetime fame as a radical revolutionary, a reputation that propelled him into the controversial politics of his time. A rector of the University of Paris and an outstanding academic, Cauchon used his exceptional juridical and rhetorical

⁶¹ Ibid., 14–15.

skills to further the interests of England in France. He prepared the text of the treaty disinheriting the Dauphin Charles and put himself fully in the service of England's Henry V and then of Henry VI, thus playing an essential role in the latter's anointing in Paris. In the name of Henry VI he undertook the purchase of Joan of Arc and obtained permission to have her judged by a tribunal of the Inquisition in Rouen, a sympathetic city to the pro-English France, invoking thereby his rights as Bishop and Count of Beauvais, a territory in which the Maid had been captured. But because he had to flee Beauvais after it fell to the French, Cauchon asked the ecclesiastical authorities of Rouen to grant him a "commission of territory," in other words a dispensation to preside over her the trial in Rouen, a region over which he no longer would have had jurisdiction as bishop of Beauvais.

After Joan's purchase from her captors, at some point in mid-March 1431, the English were indignant with the Bishop of Beauvais because Joan had not been convicted, condemned, and handed over to be executed. Cauchon appeared to have failed in the task of disposing of her since he could not find a way to declare her an apostate, a schismatic, and a heretic. Based on testimonies, he could only condemn her for wearing men's clothes, which was in his mind a symbol of her refusal to submit to the church. Without obtaining the sentence of a secular church and ignoring Joan's explanation that she needed to wear men's clothes in a prison surrendered and guarded by men on the prowl to attack her virginity, Cauchon flouted the procedural rules of an inquisitorial trial and simply delivered Joan directly to be burned at the stake. Several years later, during Joan's nullification trial, Cauchon's family had to answer for his acts. Hard-pressed to remain in the good graces of the new government, they rejected him absolutely in an act that had all the makings of Dimitrov's mummy being removed in disgrace in Sofia.

Another principal player in orchestrating Joan of Arc's burning at the stake was Cauchon's close collaborator Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester, grand chancellor to both Henry V and Henry VI, the highest ranking English clergyman present during Joan of Arc's trial. He perceived Joan of Arc as an insufferable and unbearable nuisance and made every effort to have her executed. In another irony that bears mentioning, his tomb statue in the Winchester Cathedral stands opposite Joan of Arc's statue; her image is fully armed and holds a drawn sword, menacing in afterlife the once powerful cardinal of England.

Together, the dungeon cell and the outside crowd map in Tsanev's play a virtual homeland, whose treacherous leaders and emissaries from "lawful masters" are waiting to hear Janette deny God's call to fight for her country's liberation. With the action seemingly spilling into the cell from the outside, the play brings Bulgaria's own crisis to an emotional breaking point as Janette, "the first lady of a travelling provincial theatre," announces in defiant song complete with Biblical undertones that "God sent me to liberate my enslaved people."⁶²

As the agony and ultimate triumph of Janette's self-sacrifice on the Bulgarian stage consigns Joan of Arc to the heap of history, Janette's fierce concluding flourish, that proclaims her heroic determination to bring freedom for her country, is understood to be a thrilling tribute to the play's expressive power in the contemporary present:

Keep your head up, Joan! This is the hour of your final heroic deed! Die, Joan—so you won't be able to repent / If you repent—you will be dead forever. Die—so you may live Joan of Arc ... Executioner, light the fire!⁶³

By staging another death of Joan of Arc, Tsanev urges the people of Bulgaria to sacrifice themselves in the struggle that would bring an end to communism and to the Marxist-Leninist legacy of Dimitrov and Zhivkov. The fall of the Berlin Wall may have been unexpected, but the collapse of communism was hardly surprising in Bulgaria and the countries of Eastern and Central Europe where the theater world had been the scene for more than theatrical staging of plays from the classical repertoire. In transliterary adaptations, the theater of this region voiced the widespread political disenchantment of the Stalinist era and enacted a formidable protest against communism.

⁶² Tsanev, *The Other Death*, 36.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38.

Conclusion

In its classical and transcreative version, the theater world is once again a distinctive presence that informs the intellectual force field of today's Central and Eastern Europe. In April 2015 the annual Spring Festival celebrated in Budapest featured prominently among its many cultural events the European Theatre Festival MITEM (Madách International Theatre Meeting). This forum, in its second year, was dedicated to bringing together companies from East-Central Europe, in parallel with an interest to introduce major names in Western European theater practice to an indigenous audience. Thus, Eugenio Barba's world-renowned Odin Teatret appeared alongside the relatively new institution of the National Theatre in Skopje, Macedonia, and Vienna's prestigious Burgtheater shared the festival bill with an alternative theater company from Kiev in the Ukraine. Among the theaters invited to the meeting was also the National Theatre of Bucharest, Romania with a special performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the stage adaptation of the Bulgarian director Alexander Morfov and with the Romanian actor and director of the National Theatre of Bucharest, Ion Caramitru, in the role of Prospero.

This type of collaboration confirms the validity of synergies explored in this book, and argues for the predominance of transnational cultural cohesion. In this sense the MITEM event is only one of the many European platforms that make such encounters possible; but by virtue of it staging twenty performances from thirteen countries, it duly highlights the theater world once again as a source of cultural engagement and fertile dialogues at a time of new divisions of borders in an increasingly fragmented and politically conflicted Europe. This is particularly true in the countries of Eastern Europe like Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria that have not followed

an exclusively Western line of development dictated by the European Union, and even seem to both lack and entertain, occasionally, a respective sense of assertiveness and apprehension vis-à-vis today's Russia.

One way to explain this fact is by taking a step back to examine these countries' theatrical productions whose complex literary and dramatic transcreations reveal not only the region's long and convoluted history but also the militant role of the stage and the arts. This was, in fact, the role of the theater in a post-World War II Europe that had witnessed an extension of Stalinism from the Soviet Union into the countries of the Soviet bloc. When the promises of communism failed, leading to devastating political consequences for all the societies that had embraced it, theatrical productions in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and especially in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, revealed that Stalinism was a despotic political system and that communism was an aberration.

The early signs were in the plays of Russia's native sons with "healthy" class origins like Anton Chekhov, whose *Cherry Orchard* encapsulates a political premonition of the distinctive culture of the Stalinist purges. Like a dramatic review of Stalinism foretold, Nic Ularu's *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel*, which opens this critical examination of dramatic and literary transcreations, dovetails in many ways with Chekhov's great work. As Stanislavsky suggests in his autobiographical *My Life in Art* about Chekhov's play *The Seagull*: "The more you read [Chekhov]," Stanislavsky writes, "the more you sense layers deep within," where the "complex inner action is hidden."⁶⁴ How can one read about young Petya Trofimov's student years and his squabbles with the Tsarist authorities in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* without anticipating in the forthcoming years his grown-up character featured in Ularu's *A Sequel*? In this play, Trofimov is a cultural organizer sent to his childhood town to preach Marxist-Leninist ideology while signing up the likes of Yepikhodov as members of the communist Party and triggering, in the process, the violent death of the old landed gentry and his subsequent suicide. These are the days of a pre-Soviet Russia that incorporates the murders, the executions, the aberrant ideology, and the shameless Stalinist rhetoric.

⁶⁴ Quoted in a different context in Clark's, *Moscow the Fourth Rome*, 229.

To circumvent the brutal censorship and propaganda necessary to maintain and reinforce the communist order, theatrical performance in the countries incorporated in the Soviet bloc like Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, resorted to dramatic and literary transcreations that built new dramaturgies from the old conflicts of the past, encouraging the audiences to discard the empty promises of communist ideology and the murderous tactics of Stalinism. Political opposition was fostered on stage as the Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian theater—that shared from medieval times a common cultural symbolism and modes of thought reinforced in the Stalinist era—became a stronghold of dissent, turned into a meeting place, and prepared to embarrass and undermine absolutism through the dynamic forces of the actors and the spectators.

Throughout this book I have examined how this process could actually materialize in the dramatic performances of these countries and how these countries' talented playwrights could follow the official line and draw their inspiration from the "right" texts to add legitimacy to their plays' veiled critiques of Stalinist practices. In short, the book details the many ways in which Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian playwrights used the stage to voice their denunciation of the oppressive political regime by drawing from the classical plays of Shakespeare, Molière, Jules Verne, or Chekhov, and from the lives of acclaimed heroes of communist lore, like Joan of Arc.

As the plays discussed in this book indicate, the new platform of world literature initiated in the Soviet Union provided an opportunity to frame the dramatists' arguments in dramatic and literary transcreations of classical plays used to critique Stalinism in this oblique fashion. The concept of "world literature," that originated in a remark by Goethe but was also advocated by Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto*, had gained particular currency in the Stalinist era. The slogan "Shakespearize more," attributed to Marx, became popular in 1932 and soon grew to become the mantra of the Soviet theater, with productions in which King Lear was seen as an individualistic exploiter, who had to learn about the power of shared governance, and Romeo and Juliet were featured as victims of the wealthy classes that lacked the proper society values of communism. The numerous productions of Shakespeare premiered in 1935 not only made the year look like Shakespeare's year; the reliance on the bard of the people's theater also

advanced what might be described as the high point of Soviet internationalism.

Relying on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, plays like Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* propose an Elsinore seen as a goal complete with spies, political rivalries, and poison that bring into focus not only Stalinist Russia but also communist Bulgaria. As a follow-up on Hamlet's familiar circumstances and mental bouts, Bereményi's *Halmi* reenacts the dramatic consequences of Soviet tanks rolling into Budapest (1956) and later in Prague (1968), and setting the stage for dysfunctional families, political escapes, and what Milan Kundera called the tragedy of Central Europe. Within the same contextual sphere of dramatic and literary transcreations, Višniec's *Richard the Third Will Not Take Place*, far from moralizing the tragedy of Shakespeare's famous protagonist, brings upon the stage not the well-known historical drama but Stalin's criminal treatment of artists like the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold executed along with many others, on Stalin's orders, in the Soviet Union.

As Katherine Clark argues,⁶⁵ 1935 could be singled out as the year when the culture of the Soviet Union and France converged, largely as the result of the two countries' support of the antifascist cause, with Honoré de Balzac and Leo Tolstoy seen as the exemplar writers whose work encapsulated in the previous century the cultural Moscow-Paris axis. This venue also promoted in the Soviet Union the works of great French literary figures like Molière or Jules Verne. Many of the Soviet children were exposed to Verne's sci-fi as a prop and prompt for the Soviets' effort to equal and surpass American spatial adventures and to Verne's books praising the generosity of larger than life individuals like the fictional Captain Grant. In 1939 Bulgakov published a life of Molière in Gorky's *Lives of Remarkable People* series, in which he emphasized the role of Rabelais as literary inspiration for Molière. Even though Bulgakov's play *Molière* discussed in this book was stopped from stage production in 1936 due to censorship, Bulgakov's chapter on the French playwright could be included in Gorky's series thanks to the association between Molière and Rabelais made palatable because of the Soviet alliance with leftist France and later by the Soviet critic Mikhail

⁶⁵ See "World Literature"/"World Culture" and the Era of the Popular Front (c. 1935-1936) in Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome*, 169-209.

Bakhtin in his 1940 dissertation. This type of literary lineage, which portrays Rabelais as an antiestablishment writer who challenged dogma and tradition and dwelt on the vulgar and the bodily, also made Molière an attractive cultural precursor and allowed for the staging of his plays in other countries of the communist bloc like Hungary, an aspect dramatized in Spiró's play *The Impostor*. In this play discussed in the third chapter of this book, Spiró uses Molière's *Tartuffe* as a pretext to unmask the Soviet's domination of Poland as a stand-in for his native Hungary in the communist era.

The trial of Georgi Dimitrov who became the man of the hour in 1932 because of his victory in the Reichstag fire trial that received massive support from Moscow and French leftists, had contributed in spearheading the cultural ties between the Soviet Union and France. Showing not only a united front against fascism, Dimitrov's successful trial also revealed that the world literature stretched geographically and culturally to include countries like Bulgaria, along the axis that encompassed a greater cultural, Central and Eastern Europe over which Russia exercised dominant tendencies since the days of Peter the Great—a monarch whose vulgar manners of entertainment and political crudity are dramatized in Zografi's *Peter*. Championing the stories of heroes like Joan of Arc, who was seen as an emblematic heroine sprung from the people and thus could be promoted in the Soviet Union, was also de rigueur in Bulgaria. Seen as a player on the extended cultural axis Moscow–Paris, Bulgarian theater could also circumvent censorship by allowing for stagings like Tsanev's *The Other Death of Joan of Arc* to protest the country's Kremlin-dictated communist regime and unmask the sham of Stalinist ideology.

An important role in the theater world was that of the actors, whose performance on stage undermined the foundation of the Stalinist system. As revealed in *The Murder of Gonzago* and *The Impostor*, the theater's growing political sophistication and the actors' courage and historical implication contributed to a great extent to the three countries' cultural transformation and the resulting collapse of communism. In the Central and Eastern Europe of 2015, where there seems to be a cynicism appealing particularly to intellectual extremists for whom infinite liberty and a fast road to affluence prove as illusory as communism's messianic promises, where the specter of nationalism materializes in attributing national ills to minorities and neighbors, where religious bigotry echoes the alarming

Byzantine legacy of backward despotism, the theater is called upon once again to engage the audiences.

Indeed, the international participation at the MITEM (similar to Romanian festivals, such as the Sibiu International Theatre Festival or the “Interferences” Festival at Cluj), became further confirmation that theatrical performances will continue to play their important role in spite of the dividing tactics of political governments, distinctive cultures, religious differences, or ethnic ties. Like the highlighted theatrical performances of the Cultural Olympiad events of 2012 inaugurated on Shakespeare’s birthday, the recent transnational collaborations hosted by the Budapest festival circuit proves that the theater continues to be one of today’s most enduring cultural legacies in Central and Eastern Europe. In other words, theater reconfirms its status in the region as a most viable platform for sharing in the European experience while at the same time making its mark as an entity, albeit a loose one, on account of the powerful Byzantine influences and recent Stalinist past.

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